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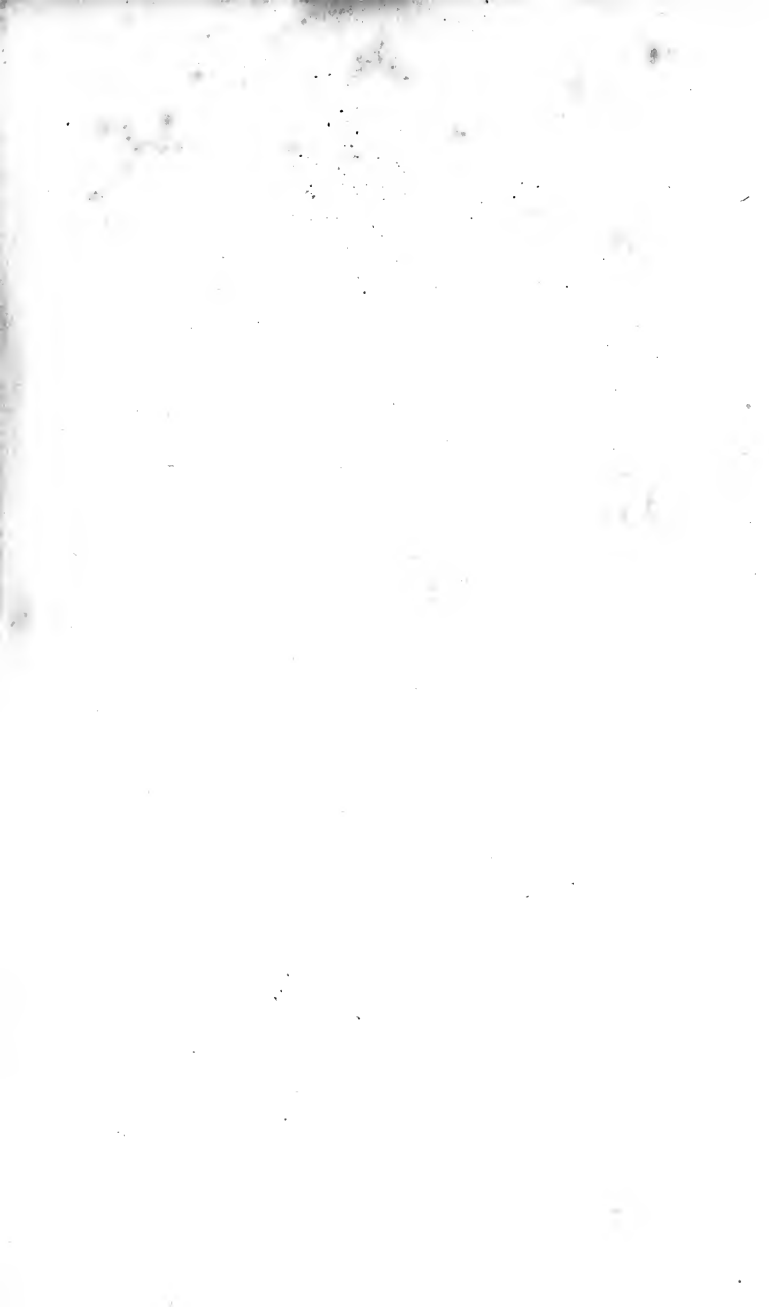
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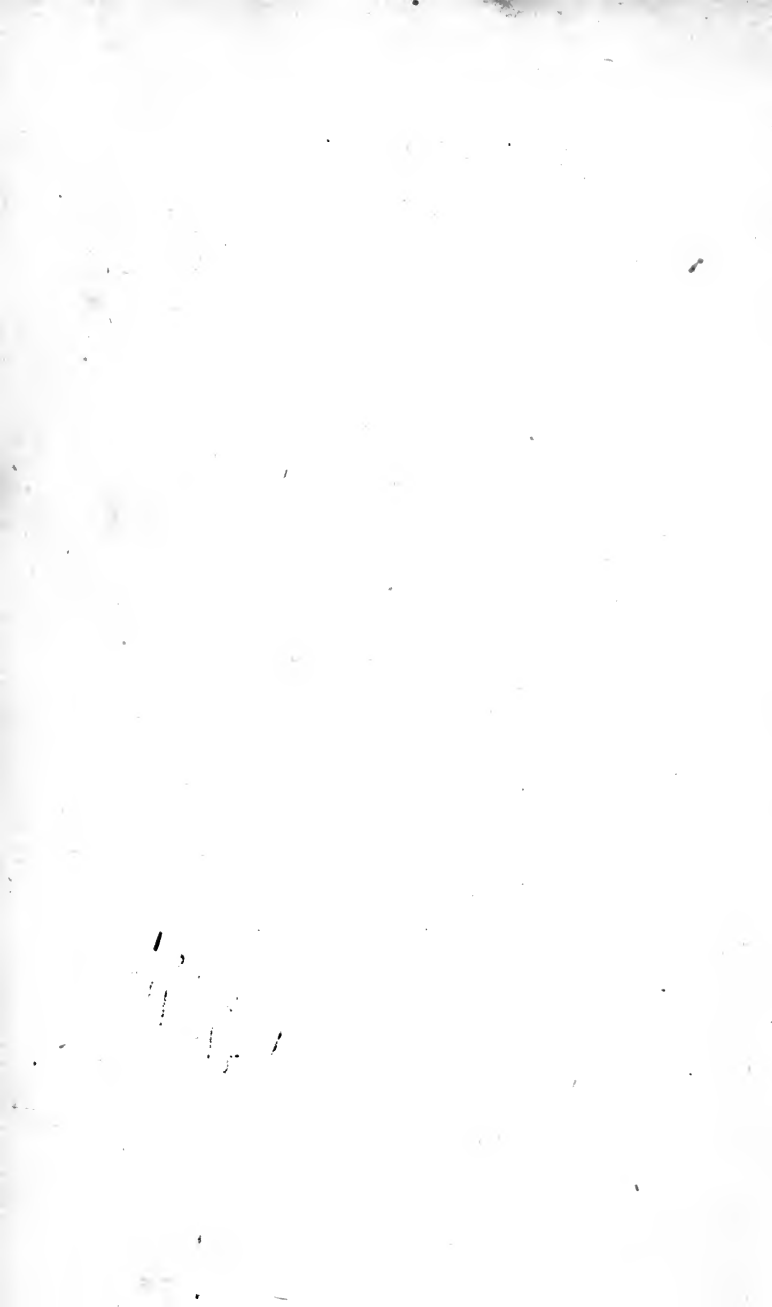












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LECTURES  
ON THE  
BRITISH POETS.

BY  
HENRY REED.

LATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

PHILADELPHIA:  
PARRY & McMILLAN,  
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## PREFACE.

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THE great success of the two volumes of my brother's lectures—the first on “English Literature,” and the second on “History as illustrated by Shakspeare's Plays”—has induced me to publish another series, still more complete, on the “British Poets,” which was delivered by Mr. Reed in 1841. These lectures are printed from the author's manuscript, with no other alteration than the omission of passages which he had used in his second course.

An addition has been made to these volumes of two essays on kindred subjects,—one on “English Sonnets,” and another on “Hartley Coleridge.”

The present volumes are probably the last of

my brother's works which I shall publish. The lectures already issued have been most kindly received on both sides of the Atlantic; and it would be ungraceful were I to omit, for myself and his still nearer family, an expression of the deep feeling with which this appreciation has inspired us.

W. B. R.

PHILADELPHIA, February 13, 1857.



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# LECTURES

ON

## ENGLISH POETRY.

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### LECTURE I.

Object of the course—Poetry the eminence of literature—The history of literature illustrated by general history and biography—The lives of Spenser and Milton—A catholic taste in poetry—Variety of poetry—Intolerance of literary judgment—Rymer and Voltaire on Shakspeare—Johnson on Milton—Jeffrey on Wordsworth—Qualifications of an enlightened critic—Utilitarian criticism—The true use of poetry—Its depreciation and abuse—Albums and scrap-books—Ben Jonson's panegyric on his art—Wordsworth—Object of these lectures not to encourage poetical composition—Sydney's Defence—Connection of poetry and science—The spirit of our times—Materialism and infidelity—Influence on imaginative power—Vindication of poetry.

THE course of Lectures I am about attempting is the first of a contemplated series upon English Poetry, undertaken as well from an uncalculating impulse, as from a conviction that, in our systems of education, it is a department more than any neglected. The treasures of the English tongue are sacrificed to the attainment of those which are more recondite in the dead or foreign

languages. As, year after year, I have wandered through the forsaken region (if I may be indulged in so far speaking of myself) and contemplated the mighty achievements of our English mind, a glowing admiration has kindled, higher and higher, the hope that it might not be beyond my strength to be the humble guide of others to the same unfailling springs of intellectual happiness.

The portion of literature to be treated of is that which may be regarded as its eminence,—its Poetry. I have ventured to speak of it as the noblest portion of our noble literature; and, if I shall succeed in awakening a thoughtful admiration of that which has been given to the world by the souls of mighty poets finding utterance in the music of English words, that opinion will not be condemned for its extravagance. It is a large field to travel over; and, therefore, among the introductory topics at present to be noticed, it is necessary to advert to the general plan, which will, however, more satisfactorily appear when practically illustrated in the succeeding lectures. It will be my aim to convey such information on the history of English poetry as the circumstances under which we meet will allow. To penetrate the obscurity of an early age, and thence to trace the progress of poetry from its rude beginnings down to modern years,—to show it in its successive eras,—to discover the connection between the poetry and the spirit of the age acting and reacting on each other,—to see how at one time the muse has soared and at another crept,—are topics which the idea of these lectures comprehends, how far soever the execution may fall short of it. And here let me beg your reflection on the remark that there are few higher functions of criticism than to reveal the connection between illustrious



literary production and the contemporaneous state of opinion and feeling, and to show especially the poet's inspirations in their relation to dominant thoughts and passions. For it is not to be questioned that, in God's providence over the destinies of the human race, men are called into being with powers to cheer or rebuke the spirit of their times with voices prophetic of weal or wo. This consideration with regard to literary history will, therefore, involve, to a certain extent, allusion to what is usually and eminently entitled history; I mean the narrative of national events. Further than this, comprehensive criticism embraces considerations of a biographical character; for, in studying the works of genius, it is a matter of no slight interest to examine the gradual structure, or rather growth, of the individual powers that have produced them. I should, for instance, deem that but an imperfect comment on the *Fairy Queen* which took no heed of the age in which its author lived,—a time animated by a high, adventurous spirit, when the sentiment of chivalry was still for a season outliving its institutions and usages, and which the poet sought imaginatively to perpetuate in his matchless allegory. It would also be a faulty negligence to turn away from the personal history which portrays Spenser embodying his high imaginings while dwelling in a barbarous island, and, at length, heart-stricken with neglect and domestic sorrow. It comes within the range of an enlarged criticism to tell of the young instincts and presages of Milton's genius, such as break forth in the exquisite inspiration of *Comus*, and thence to trace his sombre-coloured life till, after having consorted with the stern Republicans, defending their sternest deed and eulogizing their mightiest chieftain,

he retired, in danger and the darkness of a hopeless blindness, to build up the immortal epic of the *Paradise Lost*.

But a course of literary lectures must comprehend more than the communication of historical and biographical facts, the details of which, orally addressed, are apt to be unsatisfactory and often wearisome. The mind may be oppressed by the accumulation of isolated facts, which are never more troublesome than when unprovided with some principle by means of which they may be marshalled into order. A paramount object, therefore, which I have proposed, is the cultivation of a theory of criticism to be familiarized by application to the most worthy effusions of the English muse, from the first great outbreak in the happy freshness of Chaucer and the early nameless minstrels, down to the majestic and meditative imagination of Wordsworth. When I speak of a theory of criticism, let me not be understood as having in my thoughts any hypothesis fashioned from the study of some particular form of poetic invention and narrowed to it, but an ample groundwork, built in the philosophy of the human spirit, and fitted, therefore, to sustain a *catholic* taste in the estimate of literary productions. The mind is too apt to become capricious and contracted, bigoted in its literary creed, and cramped and enfeebled by a species of favouritism; so that nothing has been more common than attempts to strip the laurel from the brow of a poet like Pope, or to refuse it to that great living master of the art who has passed, through the obloquy of a scornful ignorance, to his fame. In all this there is grievous error. And, let me say, this narrowness of taste and judgment must carry with it its own penalty; for greatly does it diminish

the occasions of literary enjoyment. The intellect, like the heart, has its hundred avenues of happiness, and it is not wise to close or abandon any of them. The true aim of every student should be to acquire a taste which, while it can discriminate between the different endowments of different minds, can also feed on all that genius sets before it, no matter how various it may be. A squeamish and fastidious taste in reading is a disease which grows more and more inveterate with indulgence, and, like a hypochondriac's appetite, makes its victim alike more helpless and more unhealthy. A taste strong in health is not more ready to reject what is unwholesome than to draw its nourishment from variety. The food of the mind, like that of the body, is various, and the function of health is to assimilate to itself the variety which nature proffers. It is the invalid whose delicate digestion needs to be pampered with dainties. So is it with the weak and uncultivated in intellect. Genius pours out its abundance for them in vain. In this way arises exclusive devotion to some one author, as if wisdom had been his monopoly. While the oracle of poetry is uttering its inspirations in a thousand tones, there are ears which are deaf to all but one of the notes which issue from the temple. Genius has its multitude of voices, like nature with its scale of sounds, from the thunder rolling along the heavens and echoed by Alps or Andes, down to the whisper (to borrow one of Shakspeare's sweet sentences)—

"As gentle  
As zephyrs, blowing below the violet,  
Not wagging his sweet head."—*Cymbeline*.

Of this dulness consequent on contracted taste it would

not be difficult to find instances to verify the observation. But it is more than individual malady, for it spreads into an epidemic; and I shall hereafter have occasion to advert to revolutions in literary opinion, and to show that the feeblest voice had gained the public ear which was almost closed to that of Milton, when he craved "fit audience, though few," while Cowley was earning his speedy popularity; and, again, the glory of the older poets fading before the admiration of the high-wrought verse of Pope. An illustration within our own memory was that declamatory, undisciplined, indiscriminate enthusiasm, which, knowing no other inspiration, was in truth the poorest tribute that could be paid to genius such as Lord Byron unquestionably possessed. The domain of Parnassus is not so narrow as to be susceptible of any such appropriation. The sovereignty of even Homer or Shakspeare could hold no exclusive usurpation. The sacred mount is covered with the homesteads of the poets; some, in modest humility, where its first declivity rises from the level of the plain; others, midway up the mount; and a few seated, where others durst not soar, high as the summit in the upper air. The great endowment of poetry has been bestowed in almost infinite degrees and forms; and it is the office of philosophic criticism to trace it in its truth wherever it may exist:—in the homely ballad chanted in the nursery; in the traditionary songs of a peasantry; in strains that have kindled the spirit of a people in the hour of battle; in the softer melody of love; in the mournful elegy; in the bitterness of satire; in devotional hymns, the measured utterance of thanksgiving, prayer, and praise; in the lofty aspirations of the meditative ode; in the lifelike creation of the drama, "gor-

geous tragedy in sceptred pall;" and in the elaborate structures of the rarely-attempted epic. The taste thus cultivated and strengthened will be safe from that narrow-spirited habit which prostrates the intellect in its solitary idolatry. The voice of the muse, come whence it may, if it come in truth, will not come in vain; for the open heart will give it entrance. So important do I consider the possession of a catholic spirit in literature as the means of enlarged intellectual enjoyment, that I shall sedulously shun the adoption of any contracted poetical system, directing my efforts rather, in the examination of English poetry, so to discuss the subject as to assist not only in discriminating, but in appreciating, the varieties of merit.

The catalogue of English poets is voluminous. The mere enumeration of them and of their writings—if it were in my power to give—would consume the time which will be at my command. In a course, therefore, of lectures limited in number as well as length, some method must be adopted in treating a subject which, of course, transcends the necessary bounds. The annals of English poetry offer a series of names known much more familiarly than their productions, because fame has given them an elevation in the midst of what Milton styles "the laureate fraternity of poets." To such names the student of literature first turns his thoughts, seeking to justify their fame. I propose, therefore, in travelling through this wide and populous region of literature, to select for especial examination the most illustrious poets who in regular succession have enriched the language from the period of its formation down to the present time. Besides, criticism on the productions of the masters in an art possesses greater in-

terest and value than on those which bear a fainter impression of the stamp of genius. It is in the school of mighty artists that criticism itself is taught. The critic acquires skill by the modest contemplation—the affectionate study—of the works of genius. The great English poets, arrayed as they may be in an almost unbroken chronological series, stand as the types and emblems of the literary spirit of their times; and thus the progress of literature may be illustrated by the examination of those who are most prominent in its successive eras. This method will therefore be pursued, with occasional notices of others less celebrated.

This method will, I trust, unless grievously deficient in the execution, conduce to the attainment of the best purposes of criticism, on which I desire to say a few words before passing to other introductory topics. The main design of poetry being to communicate, through the medium of the imagination, pleasures of a highly-intellectual and moral nature, the criticism which best subserves the cause is that which illustrates and develops qualities in poetical composition adapted to effect such results. Fault-finding—so far from constituting, as is sometimes supposed, criticism—is but a subordinate function, necessary, indeed, occasionally to the formation of a discriminating judgment. But, whenever the detection of poetical irregularities and error is made the *chief* purpose, we suffer ourselves to be cheated of the enjoyment which attends that better habit of seeking for what gives pleasure in preference to that which gives pain. The best criticism ever produced has been that which had its birth in a genial admiration—a love—of that on which it passes judgment. The worst criticism is that which is en-

*Source of bitter-ness etc etc for real success.*

gendered in apathy, spleen, or malice. There is no more healthy mental exercise than the study of a great work of art, if directed to the discovery of the elements of its glory, to cause its sublimity or its beauty to be felt more and more deeply, and not only felt, but understood, that the understanding may have cognizance of that which the heart has loved. It is to criticism thus conducted in the spirit of faith and hope that genius vouchsafes to make the most ample revelation of its glories.

It is important, too, to shun the habit of dogmatic criticism. It is a singular but familiar fact that men are never more apt to be intolerant of difference of opinion than in what concerns the mingled powers of judgment and feeling denominated taste. I need suggest no other illustration than the striking contrariety of judgment on the merits of the most distinguished poets who have flourished in our own times, the discussion of which I shall not now anticipate by the expression of any opinion. To what is this owing? Partly, no doubt, to variety of character, intellectual and moral; to diversity of temperament and education; and whatsoever else makes one man in some respects a different being from his neighbour. Each reader, as well as each writer, has his peculiar bent of mind, his own way of thinking and feeling; so that the passionate strains of poetry will find an adaptation in the heart of one, while its thoughtful, meditative inspirations will come home to the heart of another. This consideration must not be lost sight of, because it goes far toward allaying this literary intolerance, which, like political or theological intolerance, is doubly disastrous, for it at the same time narrows a man's sympathies and heightens his pride. But the variety of mind or of general disposition will

not wholly explain the variety of literary opinions. After making all due allowance in this respect, it is not to be questioned that there is right judgment and wrong judgment,—a sound taste and a sickly taste. There are opinions which we may hold with a most entire conviction of their truth, an absolute and imperious self-confidence, and a judicial assurance that the contradictory tenets are errors. There is a poetry, for instance, of which a man may both know and feel not only that it gives poetic gratification to himself, but that it cannot fail to produce a like effect on every well-constituted and well-educated mind. When an English critic, Rymer, some hundred and fifty years ago, disloyal in his folly, pronounced the tragical part of Othello to be plainly none other than a bloody farce, without salt or savor,—when Voltaire scoffed at the tragedy of Hamlet as a gross and barbarous piece, which would not be tolerated by the vilest rabble of France or Italy, likening it (I give you his own words) to the fruit of the imagination of a drunken savage,—when Steevens, an editor of Shakspeare, said that an act of Parliament would not be strong enough to compel the perusal of the sonnets and other minor poems of the bard,—when Dr. Johnson remarked that Paradise Lost might be read as a duty, but could not be as a pleasure, and pronounced a sweeping condemnation on Milton's incomparable Lycidas,—when, in our own day, a Scotch critic, Lord Jeffrey, declared of Wordsworth's majestic poem, The Excursion, that "it would never do,"—in each of these opinions I know, as anybody may, with a confidence not short of demonstration, I know that there was gross and grievous falsehood. Now, if these opinions are defenceless on the score of variety of mind, and safely to be stigmatized as rash and



irrational judgments, it follows that there must exist principles to guide to wise conclusions. And how is a theory of criticism to be formed? How, in a matter in which men are apt to think and feel so differently, to have such various fancies, prejudices, and prepossessions,—how are we to get at the truth? The process of criticism is a process of induction; and, happily, we have the pages of Spenser and Shakspeare and Milton to gather instruction from;—happily, I say, for no one is so bold or so stupid in paradox as to question the sufficiency of such authorities. But induction is something more than the gathering of examples, more than what is often thought to be all-sufficient,—mere observation and experiment. The pages of the mighty poets cannot of themselves bestow the power to recognise and to feel what they contain. All their utterance may be unheeded; and it is only when the human spirit has studied its own nature that the sounds which before passed over it as idly and as noiselessly as a floating cloud make the spiritual music which is poetry. It is not enough to know the voice and the tones of poetry, but to discover the avenues of the human heart which lie open to them, and which send back the music echoed from its depths. These are the sources of that wisdom which enables us to distinguish the truth of poetic inspiration from that which is counterfeit and delusive. I know not where else to search for the elements of criticism than in the minstrelsy of the mighty dead, and the life which is the pulse of every living heart.

It would not be inappropriate for me here to examine what is the union of qualifications essential to the character of an enlightened critic of poetry. There is needed a mind at once poetical and philosophical, with powers

imaginative and analytical, and not merely the passive recipiency of a correct taste, but the quick sympathy of an active imagination, untrammelled by conventional or technical precepts; a natural sensibility; force and kindly affections; a vigorous and well-disciplined understanding; and a judicial composure dwelling above the clouded and fitful region of prejudice. Let me assure you that when I look forth to the magnificent theme which is before me,—the vast compass of English poetry and its lofty soarings,—no one is more painfully impressed than he who is addressing you with the thought of how much is demanded for the faithful execution of that which he has undertaken.

I have already intimated an opinion that the noblest portion of a nation's literature is its poetry. I am well aware that this is a sentiment in which many minds will be reluctant to concur, and that not a few will utterly revolt at it. We live in an age whose favourite question is, What is the use? The inquiry is a rational one; and equally rational is the conclusion,—that what is useless is contemptible. But the notion of utility is very various, and we must be cautious that we are not condemning by a false standard. In the common business transactions of the world, men are very careful as to the weights and measures they are dealing with. The buyer of a yard of cloth, or a chest of tea, or a prescription of medicine, trusts to an accurate measurement as the means of giving him all that he is entitled to, and, in the last case, saving him from being drugged with more than his malady makes inevitable. Now, when you turn from the world of trade to the inner world of moral and intellectual operations, you will see men weighing and measuring

out their judgments and their sentiments with all the confidence of logical deduction from their premises, not dreaming that often in those premises lies the fallacy of a false balance and a crooked rule. The mind, instead of being truly poised, is often perversely planted; and it has its makeweights in the shape of covert prejudices or prepossessions, and thence come distorted judgments and misdirected affections. Eminently is this the case in our estimate of utility, for the obvious reason that, men proposing to themselves different objects to be attained, a pursuit is applauded as useful, or despised as the reverse, just as it may happen to conduce to those ends respectively. Thus, things are judged by standards never meant for them,—a process as senseless as if one sought to measure by a balance or to weigh by a foot-rule. The aim of one man may be wealth; of another, power, political or military; of another, notoriety or fame; of another, ease, eating and drinking and sleeping; of another, knowledge or literary cultivation; of another, the social amelioration of mankind; or, of another, the enlargement of his whole being by the improvement of every talent which God has given him, and the further-looking hope of the promised happiness of an hereafter. Each one, by a process of reasoning, equal, too, in logical accuracy, reaches a conclusion of his own. And thus the art of bookkeeping and the tables of interest are useful; and so is the art of cookery; and so is history, or politics, or the art of war; and so is poetry; and so is the Bible;—all useful, each in its own—I need not add how different—way. But the moment you begin to apply to any one the standard proper to another, then comes error, with confusion on confusion. Especially is this the case with regard to literature, and,

most of all, to the higher department of imaginative composition. The question to be discussed in its most striking form comes directly to this:—What is the use of poetry? Now, when a question of this sort is made, the answer must depend very much on the temper and the tone in which it is propounded. If it come with a self-sufficient defiance of reply, with that scornful materialism which recognises no standard of value but what affects the outward man,—if it come from that quenchless spirit of traffic whose element is the market, and which concentrates the intensity of man's being—to describe it in a familiar way—within that busy but small portion of the day comprehended between the hours of nine and three, making life a kind of bank-hour existence,—then, I say, the question may, like Pilate's, better remain unanswered; for the very faculties to be addressed are torpid or dead, no more able to take cognizance of the loftier aims of literature than the deaf to delight in music or the blind in colours. There is a wide gulf separating the cold, dark, and indurated heart of the sensual and the mercenary from the imaginative and the spiritual; and it is a vain and almost hopeless thing to try to send the voice across it. If ever the blindness of the clouded heart, purged away in any chance moment, catches a glimpse of the glory enveloping the mighty poets, it sees them only “as trees walking.”

But the inquiry as to the use of poetry may come in a better shape,—the meek questioning of a docile doubt. It may be the craving of a heart yet pure from the pride of materialism in all its forms, and of a young imagination feeble in its apprehensions of imaginative truth; and then no pains should be spared to convince that poetry

has, in the highest and truest sense, its use. Criticism has no more precious office than to give its aid "that men may learn more worthily to understand and appreciate what a glorious gift God bestows on a nation when he gives them a poet." A sense of the dignity of the subject we are approaching makes me solicitous to contribute something to the formation of correct opinion. It is necessary to go to the root of what is erroneous, and to lay the foundation broadly and deeply for sound principles. Let us, in the first place, observe what is the mode of thinking prevalent in the estimate of poetical composition. I do not mean opinions expressed in the shape of deliberately-framed propositions, but a state of opinion which, while rarely venturing on such expressions, will yet betray itself in numberless indirect forms equally significant. If any one will be at the trouble of observing these, he can scarce fail to perceive signs of a low appreciation of the imaginative department of literature, whether considered in comparison or positively. It is betrayed either by absolute neglect or by what is far more injurious, because more plausible and offensive,—the habit of alluding to poetry as a mere matter of sentimental recreation, or, at best, a species of elegant trifling, congenial to effeminacy or immaturity of mind rather than to the robust and manly energy of a ripened intellect. I have little doubt that, in many minds, the first association called up by the word "poetry" is the effusion of that generous vanity which gratifies itself in a small way on the pages of albums and scrap-books, and sometimes by a more adventurous flight, as high as the corner of a newspaper. Observe, too, how the title of poet is conferred—in apparent unconsciousness of any absurdity in

such use of language—on any stripling, male or female, who accomplishes the feat of stringing together a few sentimental rhymes; and what is more sickening to see is the self-complacency with which the title is received and worn. But the false opinions of poetry stop not at a low estimate, for it is often seen to put on the form of contemptuous repugnance. It is shunned as fostering a dangerous, dreamy, visionary habit of mind, incompatible with the demands of active life. Now, against the folly involved in this egregious misappreciation of the worth of genuine poetry it is hard to argue, for it seldom occurs in the tangible form of distinct avowals. But that it exists, and is influencing the direction of mental pursuits and affecting the habitual tone of thought and feeling, cannot be doubted by any one who will observe the neglect of poetical literature, or the supercilious spirit with which a poet's endowments are regarded in comparison with qualifications for other departments of intellectual occupation.

For this there must be some cause;—something, too, which sustains so wide-spread an error. Half the refutation of fallacy will often be the mere discovery of its origin. There is confusion of mind on one point, which greatly contributes to the mistaken opinions under discussion. I allude to the very common and superficial error of identifying poetry with verse. That verse—the melody of metre and rhyme—is the appropriate diction of true poetry, its outward garb, (for a reason I shall hereafter advert to,) is perfectly true; but then it is nothing more than the outward form; it is the dress and not the body or the soul of poetry. Very far am I from entertaining those principles of criticism which recognise as

poetry imaginative composition divested of metrical expression, which I deem its natural and essential form. But then there may be the form without the appropriate substance. The idea of poetry comprehends verse: but there may be verse without a ray of poetry; and to suppose that dexterity in versifying implies the endowment of a poet's powers is much the same confusion of thought as to think that a military cloak makes a soldier, or an ecclesiastical vestment makes a priest. Thought, whether uttered in prose or verse, may undergo no change with the change of the outward fashion. When verse is mistaken for poetry, discredit is brought on the latter because it is well known that the making of verses looking indeed very like poetry is within the power of the shallowest intellect. It may be the merest mechanism conceivable. There is a multitude of verses with no more of the life-blood of poetry than there is life in the tattered garments dangling and fluttering on a stick to frighten the fowls of the air from a growing crop. To place the mere versifier in the same category with the genuine poet is the gross fallacy of giving to the butterfly, the bat, and the winged insect brotherhood with the dove and the eagle. It is a false affinity, from which true imagination has always revolted. The classical student will, on a moment's reflection, recall the feelings in this particular of more than one of the Roman satirists; but I know no passage of the kind finer than one in which that vigorous dramatist, Ben Jonson, at once spurns his false brethren and vindicates his own high calling in a strain that rises on the blast of a magnanimous indignation:—

“I can approve  
The state of Poesy, such as it is.

Blessed, eternal, and most true divine.  
 Indeed, if you will look on Poesy  
 As she appears in many, poor and lame,  
 Patched up in remnants and old worn-out rags,  
 Half starved for want of her peculiar food,  
 Sacred invention, then I must confirm  
 Both your conceit and censure of her merit:—  
 But view her in her glorious ornaments,  
 Attired in the majesty of Art,  
 Set high in spirit with the precious taste  
 Of sweet Philosophy; and, which is most,  
 Crowned with the rich traditions of a soul  
 That hates to have her dignity profaned  
 With any relish of an earthly thought:  
 Oh, then how proud a presence doth she bear!  
 Then she is like herself,—fit to be seen  
 Of none but grave and consecrated eyes.  
 Nor is it any blemish to her fame  
 That such lean, ignorant, and blasted wits,  
 Such brainless gulls, should utter their stolen wares  
 With such applauses in our vulgar ears;  
 Or that their slubbered lines have current pass  
 From the fat judgments of the multitude,  
 But that this barren and infected age  
 Should set no difference 'twixt these empty spirits  
 And a true poet, than which reverend name  
 Nothing can more adorn humanity."

The reproach of the debasement of poetic inspiration  
 to unworthy or corrupt uses is thus repelled by a later  
 poet when he proclaims that

"Deathless powers to verse belong;  
 And they like demigods are strong  
 On whom the Muses smile;  
 But some their function have disclaimed,  
 Best pleased with what is aptliest framed  
 To enervate and defile.



“Nor such the spirit-stirring note  
When the live chords Alcæus smote  
Inflamed by sense of wrong.  
‘Woe! woe to tyrants!’ from the lyre  
Broke threateningly, in sparkles dire  
Of fierce, vindictive song.

And not unhallowed was the page,  
By wingéd love inscribed to assuage  
The pangs of vain pursuit;  
Love listening while the Lesbian maid  
With finest touch of passion swayed  
Her own *Æolian lute*.”\*

Let me here remark that the purpose of this course is not to encourage poetical composition. I have no such thought; but I am not without a hope that it may so far contribute to the appreciation of the poetic function as to prevent the puny ambition of weaving verses under the delusion that the production is poetry. It is a weak waste of time, requiring very little intellect, no feeling, and no imagination, and yet very apt to foster a habit of self-beguiling vanity. This course on the English Poets is to persuade not to the writing, but to the reading, of poetry. Where the rare inspiration does exist, it is a fire self-sustaining in the spirit to which it is given, and the stranger's hand can neither fan nor quench it. It has been finely remarked that there can be poetry in the writings of few men, but it ought to be in the hearts and lives of all.

This cause just noticed is not adequate fully to explain the phenomena of opinions under discussion. There must be some deeper and more abiding motive for the tendency to disparage the productions of imagination.

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\* Wordsworth's "September."

The defence of poetry is no new topic. In entering on the illustration of this department of English Literature, I feel as if I could scarce venture to advance without vindicating the worth and dignity of the subject; and when I reflect that, very nearly three hundred years ago, there was given to the world a celebrated treatise on this very subject, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that there must be some cause, deep seated in the nature of mankind and stronger than any temporary or local influence, which engenders mistaken notions respecting this department of imaginative literature. I cannot omit commending to the student of English literature the treatise alluded to,—“The Defence of Poetry, by Sir Philip Sydney,”—as well for its intrinsic merit, and as the production of the earliest good prose-writer in the language, as for the distinguished interest attaching to the personal character and history of the author,—the matchless model of a modern knight,—a soldier, a statesman, and a scholar, over whose early death on the field of battle a whole kingdom mourned, and of whom a literary antiquary has asserted that two hundred authors could be counted who have spoken his praises. “I have,” are Sydney’s words, “just cause to make a pitiful defence of poor Poetry, which, from almost the highest estimation of learning, has fallen to be the laughing-stock of children.” He figuratively addressed his contemporaries “as born so near the dull-making cataract of Nilus that they could not hear the planet-like music of Poetry; as having so earth-creeping minds that they could not lift themselves to the sky of Poetry.” Some verses written by an obscure poet shortly after the “Defence” thus acknowledged the benefit it conferred :—

“Good poets were in high esteem  
When learning grew in price  
Their virtue and their verse did seem  
A great rebuke to vice.

“With blunt, base people of small sense  
They fall now in disdain;  
But Sydney’s book in their defence  
Did raise them up again;

“And sets them next divines in rank,  
As members meet and fit  
To strike the world’s blind boldness blank  
And whet the bluntest wit.”

But, after all, poetry must be its own vindication; and it is an interesting fact that, at the very time Sydney was composing his defence, Spenser and Shakspeare were revolving the elements of their great imaginings. The dulness Sydney complained of was the dark hour before the coming dawn. His plea touched the slumbering spirit of his nation, like the breath of morning, waking them to a day more glorious than ever shone on the human intellect.

I have alluded to Sir Philip Sydney’s work, not only because its rank in English literature entitles it to passing notice, but because it shows a depreciation of the poetic art in various ages. I doubt not it is a prejudice as ancient as poetry itself, and that it will last while the world lasts, modified, indeed, as I shall endeavour presently to show, by the distinctive spirit of the times. The *constitutional* infirmity of man is his proneness to materialism. I use the word in its largest sense, to express the tendency to limit our aims and desires to results which are called practical because they are palpable and mea-

surable; the overvaluing the world of sense and the consequent undervaluing the world of spirit; the forgetfulness of the nobler part of our complex nature,—the inner life, because the calls for outward life are louder and unceasing. It brings, too, the inability to rise under the pressure of that narrow period enveloping each passing point of time which we call the present; and thus, just in proportion as the heart becomes materialized, does it go stumbling on in its blindness, borrowing no ray from past or future, each step with no more than its own light, and that not from the spiritual within, but the dim glimmering of the senses. One generation may be more imbruted in its sensuality than another,—one race more than another; as the same clime where breathed the Athenian fed the Spartan and the Bœotian. But the common curse upon humanity is that it is of the earth, earthy. Whatever conflicts with this corruption is doomed to encounter neglect and obloquy. The functions of all true poetry are spiritual. Whatever form the prejudice may assume,—whether ignorant or contemptuous neglect or direct reprobation,—the solution of it is to be found in the contrariety between the works of pure imagination and a corrupt tendency of human nature; that which is material perpetually striving for ascendancy over that which is spiritual. In the palmy days of Grecian mythology there were, I doubt not, those who deemed the acorns that fell from the mysterious oaks at Dodona more precious than the inspirations uttered from those sacred groves.

This influence, common to all ages of the world because constitutional to humanity, may be aggravated by other agencies in different ages of civilization. Our own

has its marked characteristics,—its good and its evil tendencies. I should very inadequately discuss the subject under consideration were I to omit to inquire in what the spirit of our times affects the appreciation of the works of imagination; whether the faculty embodies the creations on the canvas, or in marble, or in the noblest mould of inventive genius,—in language. The principles of this discussion have, it may be readily seen, an application to the province of the painter and the sculptor as well as to the most intellectual of the Fine Arts, which forms our subject. The age we live in claims to be in an uncommon degree enlightened. And what are the grounds of its pride? During the past thirty or forty years, advances have been made in the physical sciences transcending, as far as we have the means of comparison, any thing achieved in the same department in any former period of the world. The results of this development are manifest in all the avenues of civilization; and so multitudinous are the combinations of material agencies, such the intellectual mastery over the blind elements, that no limit seems to be set in this respect to human expectation. The mind has scarce time to recover from its admiration of some invention or achievement by powers disclosed by mechanical science, before it is called away to some new exploit. It is but lately, for instance, that the continents of Europe and America have suddenly been, to all practical purposes, brought twice as near to each other as they ever were before. Again, within a year or so, we were told that a French chemist had gained the power of giving permanency to the fleeting reflections of a mirror: that was listened to with astonishment, and something of incredulity, which have now passed wholly

\* And now (1850) the Fish ...  
Fishes ...

away. And thus we seem to be living amid a succession of nine-days' wonders. To regard this state of things with regret or complaint would obviously be in a high degree irrational as well as unmanly. On the contrary, the prodigious progress of physical science and the attendant arts is a fit subject of congratulation, bringing, as it does, manifold amelioration in all that concerns our physical existence. Besides, I could not bring myself to indulge for one moment a sentiment of jealousy or disparagement of physical science; for often have I witnessed with admiration the single-hearted devotion of the man of science to the vast department of his investigations,—single-hearted in his seeking after *truth*, and indignant at the utilitarian question which would limit the range of inquiry to obvious and immediate results. The genius of true poetry is not daunted by the speed of science. But there is an inquiry of grave import, which, in our exultation, we are apt to overlook. The peril incident to fallen humanity is forgotten,—that blessings come not unalloyed, and that, abused, they may be perverted into evils. It is fit, therefore, to ask whether the improvements upon which our age prides itself are so absolutely unqualified as to justify the rather-contemptuous compassion for the unilluminated condition of our forefathers. Is it all profit and no loss? Are we quite safe in reposing upon our gains with a confidence that nothing of our treasures has imperceptibly been allowed to pass away? In noticing what I believe to be some of the characteristic errors and frailties of our times, I am anxious to speak with modesty; and therefore I quote the language of an author by whom it has been well remarked that, “in regard to the supposed superiority

of the present age, the mistake arises in various ways. A part of knowledge, perhaps the least important, is put for the whole; no balance is struck between what is gained in one department and what is lost in another; the worthiness of the ends pursued is not considered in determining the value of the means; the economy of wealth is taken as the measure of national welfare; legislation passes for jurisprudence. So, again, the study of nature may have flourished, the study of mind may have drooped; the arts of life may have advanced, domestic wisdom may have lost ground; education may have been diffused, learning may have declined. All our gains are counted; but our losses are not set against them. And, again, personal comfort, convenience, or luxury, mental or bodily, is openly proposed, not only as the best, but as the only, object of intellectual pursuit; whereas, formerly, the search of truth was supposed to bring its own recompense. Thus, a lower end is substituted for a higher; and by overstating the claims of our fellow-creatures, once too much neglected in these studies, we forget the more sublime relation between the human spirit and the God who gave it."

These traits in the spirit of our times are characterized by another writer, in an eloquent and philosophical passage bearing more immediately on the subject I am discussing. "Men have been pressing forward for some time in a path which has betrayed by its fruitfulness, furnishing them constant employment for picking up things about their feet when thoughts were perishing in their minds. While mechanic arts, manufactures, agriculture, commerce, and all those products of knowledge which are confined to gross, definite, and tangible objects,

have, with the aid of experimental philosophy, been every day putting on more brilliant colours, the splendour of imagination has been fading. Sensibility, which was formerly a generous nursling of rude nature, has been chased from its ancient range in the wide domain of patriotism and religion, with the weapons of derision, by a shadow calling itself Good Sense; calculations of presumptuous expediency, groping its way among partial and temporary consequences, have been substituted for the dictates of paramount and infallible conscience, the supreme embracer of consequences; lifeless and circumspect decencies have banished the graceful negligence and unsuspicious dignity of virtue." It is scarcely necessary to remark that an age thus characterized must be in a great degree unimaginative and its tendencies adverse to poetic culture. Look round upon society, and you behold on every side symptoms of restless curiosity, and the love of outward excitement stimulated to so high a pitch that the strenuous exercises of imagination and all spiritual thought are neglected as uncongenial or despised as visionary. We live in turmoil; and the man who dares to pause but for brief meditation is in danger of being trodden down by the throng that is pressing forward. Philosophy must deal with handicrafts, with steam, with the crucible, with magnetism, with storms, with manufactures, with exports and imports and the currency; but, if it seek its ancient track,—the human spirit and all the immaterial life that *it* sustains,—the world turns away from it as from useless scholastic speculation. It may be tolerated as a piece of monastic harmlessness, but no more, in the necessities of over-active existence. In a state of opinion where such principles are dominant, poetry of a



high order will in vain claim from the many the affectionate homage which its votaries render. In the strife between the antagonist elements of our complex being the mastery is too often won by the sensual over the spiritual; and hence it is that man is said to live by sight rather than by faith,—a life adverse alike to all that is religious and all that is imaginative. A great poet, standing by the seaside, conscious of the influence of natural objects, and conscious, too, of the apathy of a worldly-minded generation, boldly recoils from the materialism and infidelity of a Christian age as more uncongenial than the fond aspirations even of Paganism.

“The world is too much with us. Late and soon,  
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
 Little we see in nature that is ours;  
 We have given our hearts away,—a sordid boon!  
 This sea, that bares her bosom to the moon,—  
 The winds, that will be howling at all hours,  
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,—  
 For this, for every thing, we are out of tune;  
 It moves us not. Great God! I’d rather be  
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn  
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea,  
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn.”

There is another influence adverse to imaginative culture. It is not only that one part of knowledge, and that not affecting the highest and most permanent interests of mankind, has usurped too large a space in the public thought, but there has been a tendency to unequal cultivation of some of the chief faculties of the mind. This is not the occasion to examine that modern mental philo-

sophy which, rife especially on the rank soil of France and in the years of its revolution, was disseminated in the latter part of the last century. Enough for my present purpose is it to say that it gave to one power of the mind a supremacy which has proved injurious to the just distribution of all. The calculating faculty of the understanding has been made the sole arbiter to which the other reflective faculties and imagination and the moral powers are to bow as vassals. This has led to a false confidence in a dangerous guide; for never is man more apt to go astray than when, casting away all other light, he follows implicitly the leading of mere reasoning. Reason, (I use the term in the sense of the logical faculty,) alienating itself in its usurpations from the other powers, becomes wilful, rash, and tyrannous. Thence comes a self-confidence in the age which casts off time-honoured associations with the past, and thus, to borrow a fine expression, "covenant is broken with the mighty dead." Thence come the thousand theories which unceasingly are flitting across the public mind:—theories of education, mental and bodily, theories of social and political regeneration, and theories of religion. Thence has come the revolution we have witnessed in the fashion of children's books; the healthy, imaginative, old-fashioned story-books displaced by preposterous devices to fill the young heart with pedantry. We are cramped by false and narrow systems of metaphysics, teaching that wisdom is to be drawn from one reservoir, when, the truth is, it is flowing from a hundred springs,—imagination, the affections, faith, prayer, and whatever else helps to guide and chasten intellectual action. There is a danger, it has been well said, "that the perfections and achievements of intellect

will be too much prized, too much desired, too much sought for. Already there are many who expect from human knowledge the work of divine grace. Science has made man master of matter; it has enabled him to calculate the revolutions of nature, to multiply his own powers beyond all that was dreamed of spell or talisman: and now it is confidently prophesied that another science is to remove all the moral and political evils of the planet; that by analyzing the passions we shall learn to govern them; and that, when the science of education is grown of age, virtue will be taught as easily as arithmetic and comprehended as readily as geometry with the aid of wooden diagrams. Let us not be deceived. 'Leviathan is not so tamed.' The tree of knowledge is not the tree of life."

I am speaking of the propensity of the age,—a propensity happily controlled by salutary checks. But, if any one desire to know what is the utmost peril when such restraints are removed, he may turn to the spectacle of revolutionary France, when, in the highest paroxysm of rational regeneration, there was paraded a living representation of the goddess of Reason, which the philosophers bade the people worship; and what the idol was I dare not venture even to name to you.

But, bringing these general observations to bear upon our subject,—when such a condition of thought becomes predominant, in what estimation may we expect to find the power of imagination? Very much what in point of fact may be observed to exist. It will be regarded as that faculty which gives birth to novels and romances and other idle fictions; which leads men into wild and extravagant speculations and tempts some to add

superfluous ornaments to their statements of matters of fact. What is the nature and the true functions of genuine imagination I shall endeavour to show hereafter, my present purpose being only to suggest how a particular habit of opinion may bring disparagement upon one of the chief endowments of the human spirit. Vibrating as the judgment is apt to do from one extreme to another, the question may be asked, whether the censure of undue exaltation of the reasoning faculties is meant to be dissuasive from its cultivation or to suggest the propriety of suspending them by processes of the imagination. I have intimated nothing of the kind. The error would then be great, though in another direction. The disproportionate exercise of our faculties is an evil, no matter what the disproportion may chance to be. When I complain that one of these faculties is neglected and often sacrificed, it would be strange indeed were I to fall into the snare of encouraging a like neglect of others. On this point let me sustain myself by what seems to me the wise authority of an eloquent writer:—

“The imagination, if left without restraint to follow its own conceits, is vain and wild, and teems with fantastic superstitions; the understanding, unless other powers elevate and ennoble it, is narrow and partial and empirical and superficial. While the reason is cultivated, let not the other faculties be neglected; let it substantiate its forms and give them a body of sound experiential and historical knowledge; and let not this body be without the beautiful, ever-varying hues, the glowing flushes and ardent glances, of the imagination. So may it become an edifice wherein wisdom may not be ashamed to take up her dwelling. No one of the powers with which God

has endowed us is useless; no one is meant to lie waste, no one to run waste. Only when they are knit together and working in unison and harmony may we hope that the vision of truth will descend upon them."

I have thus endeavoured to trace to its sources the tendency to disparage the study of poetry as an intellectual occupation. If we can satisfy our minds that such a state of opinion has its origin in the causes suggested,—the indiscriminate confusion of all verse, no matter how vapid and unimaginative, with true poetry; the perpetual, because constitutional, proneness to suffer materialism and materialized notions to encroach on the spiritual endowments of humanity; the almost exclusive appropriation of the title of philosophy to mechanical science, looking only to the world of sense; and the undue exaltation of the reasoning faculty over all other mental powers,—it is enough to bring somewhat of conviction that the opinion itself is error. But the refutation of objections is not enough: a subject must be set on the independent foundation of its own principles. I have felt that I could not safely advance without an attempt to dispose of the preliminary considerations which have been noticed. This makes it necessary to defer to the next lecture the main introductory subject,—the nature of Poetry, with an examination of its inspiration, its relation to the Fine Arts, and the moral uses of a cultivated imagination,—and, after that, to proceed to the glorious registry of our English poets.

In conclusion, one word of a personal nature. This course of lectures has been prompted by the belief that it was due from me to this community, considering my position in this ancient Philadelphia institution. It is

the result of mature reflection, with a full sense of the obstacles and discouragements which it may encounter. Be those discouragements what they may, standing on the ground of duty, this post of mine shall not be deserted. I have sought to place before the public a plan the subject of which I know to be worthy their consideration. But how far the lecturer may be esteemed competent to the task he has ventured on, it would be indecorous for me to indulge the most distant fancy. It will not, however, be too much for me to say that I stand here not a suppliant for favours, but with the consciousness of a single and an honourable purpose in the cause of literature; and to add that, while I form no conjecture how many of my friends I may have the pleasure of seeing here again, no contingency of that sort shall prevent the prosecution of this enterprise to its completion.

## LECTURE II.

The nature of Poetry and its ministrations—Imaginative capacity—Lord Bacon's view—Milton's—Poetry a divine emanation—Its foundation is truth—The truth of inner life—Painting and Sculpture—Poetry an imitative art—The Child and the Shell—Scientific investigation of truth—Human sympathy cultivated by Poetry—Immortality—Spiritual aspirations—Stoicism irreconcilable with Poetry—Loyalty and chivalry—The songs of Israel—Taste, a wrong name—Mental inactivity inconsistent with criticism—Due proportion of intellectual powers—Walter Scott and Sir Philip Sydney.

HAVING, in my last lecture, endeavoured to remove some preliminary obstacles to an entrance on our subject, I wish now to proceed to the consideration of the nature of poetry and its ministrations, the poet's mission to his fellow-beings, and his powers. This is equivalent to an examination of the faculty of imagination; for poetry is the voice of imagination. The two are inseparable; and it is one and the same thing to study the nature of that endowment, the moral uses of a cultivated imagination, and the purposes of genuine poetry.

The duty of cultivation, let me observe in the first place, rests on the possession of each power of the human mind. One of the universal endowments, infinitely different indeed in its degrees, is the faculty of imagination; and it would be strangely interpreting God's scheme in the government of the world to suppose that this mighty

power was bestowed for no other than the pitiful offices often deemed its distinctive functions. It has more precious trusts than the production of tawdry romances or sentimental novels. The very existence of imagination is a proof that it is an agency which may be improved to our good or neglected and abused to our harm. Even if it were beyond our comprehension to conceive how it may be auxiliary to humanity, it would be no more than a simple impulse of faith to feel that, so surely as it is an element implanted in our nature, it is there to be nurtured and strengthened by thoughtful exercise. But we are not left to the strenuous effort of implicit faith; for the purposes of the endowment are manifest and multifarious. It has been well demanded, "To what end have we been endowed with the creative faculty of the imagination, which, glancing from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, vivifies what to the eye seems lifeless and actuates what to the eye seems torpid, combines and harmonizes what to the eye seems broken and disjointed, and infuses a soul with thought and feeling into the multitudinous fleeting phantasmagoria of the senses? To what end have we been so richly endowed, unless—as the prime object and appointed task of the reason is to detect and apprehend the laws by which the almighty Lawgiver upholds and ordains the world he has created—it be in like manner the province and the duty of the imagination to employ itself diligently in perusing and studying the symbolical characters where-with God has engraven the revelations of his goodness on the interminable scroll of the visible universe?"

But it is important to cite the highest possible authority; and I know not where I can better look for



it than in that almost superhuman survey of human knowledge contained in the philosophy of Lord Bacon. Words of wisdom are there which cast their light on almost all the paths of mental inquiry; and on the present occasion I seek them with special earnestness, because of the superficial notion that the Baconian philosophy took thought of the domains of only physical investigation. It can, however, be shown that among the objects of inquiry to which he pointed attention was, how the imagination may be fortified and exalted; and his brief but celebrated passage on Poetry may be aptly repeated:—"The use of this feigned history hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being, in proportion, inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is, agreeable to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety, than can be found in the nature of things. Therefore, because the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroical; because true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merit of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution and more according to revealed providence; because history representeth actions and events more ordinary and less interchanged, therefore poesy endueth them with more rareness and more unexpected variations: so, as it appeareth, that poesy serveth and conferreth to magnanimity and delectation; and, therefore, it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind

by submitting the shews of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things."

In these pregnant sentences, worthy of deep reflection, may be discovered the germs of the whole philosophy of poetry; and he who will follow as far as they light him in the paths of truth will leave far behind the questions and the cavils respecting the endowments of imagination. I have no desire to lead you into the tangles of metaphysics; but I beg your reflection on the passage cited, because it is the highest authority to be found in philosophy. The leading thought in this profound meditation of Bacon's, as I understand it, is that there dwells in the human soul a sense—a faculty—a power of some kind, call it by what name you may—which craves more than this world affords, and which gives birth to aspirations after something better than the events of our common life; and that the poet's function is to minister to this want. From the earliest records of literature, the creations of poetry in all ages have found a congeniality in the breast of man, though the world might be searched in vain for the archetypes of those creations. A great modern poet boldly tells us of

"The gleam,  
The light that never was on sea or land,  
The consecration, and the poet's dream."

and yet the heart takes those dreams home to itself for realities. Humanly speaking, this is mysterious in our nature. When a mind like Bacon's is brought to the contemplation, it penetrates to the centre of the mystery, and intimates that the solution is to be found only in the inspired record of the history of the human soul; that its

mingled majesty and poverty, its aspiration and its destitution, are to be traced to the fall from primeval purity. There was a time when the human soul and the world in which it was dwelling were better mated; when the discord and incongruity described by Bacon had not begun:—

“Upon the breast of new-created earth  
Man walked; and wheresoe’er he moved,  
Alone, or mated, solitude was not.  
He heard upon the wind the articulate voice  
Of God; and angels to his sight appeared,  
Crowning the glorious hills of Paradise,  
Or through the groves gliding, like morning mist  
Enkindled by the sun. He sat and talked  
With wingéd messengers, who daily brought  
To his small island in the ethereal deep  
Tidings of joy and love.”

The loss of innocence was the beginning of a new era in the history of our race. I have no desire to indulge in speculation on a subject which has perplexed theology; enough is it to believe what we are taught by God’s own word:—that the fall was a moral and physical revolution. But we are not taught, either by that oracle or by the study of the mind, that the primal glory was wholly quenched. The faculties of man, fearfully disordered and corrupted, had still some remnant of their original endowments; and, to the mind of the great English sage, the aspirations of poetry appeared as the struggles of a once pure but fallen humanity,—the strife of the mingled elements of our nature,—the image of the Deity in which man was created, and the dust into which his soul was breathed.

From Lord Bacon’s magnificent exposition I must pass on to another great tribute paid to poetry. His was

the thought of the philosopher calmly looking (as Cowley said of him) "from the mountain-top of his exalted wit." Let me, in the next place, offer to your consideration some of the expressions of the lofty ideas of a *poet* upon his own art. I do not wish to anticipate what I shall have to say hereafter in the course respecting the great English epic poet; but I need his authority for the worth of poetic wisdom, coming as it does with such weight from one who realized so gloriously his own high conceptions of his calling.

In the spirit of Milton, imagination brought an instinctive sense of its majesty, which bursts forth in its own sublime vindication,—probably the most eloquent annunciation of the functions of the imagination ever uttered.

"These abilities, (by which the grandest poetry is produced,) wheresoever they be found, are the inspired gift of God, and are of power, beside the office of a pulpit to unbind and cherish in a great people the seeds of virtue and public civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind and set the affections in right tune; to celebrate in glorious and lofty hymns the throne and equipage of God's almightiness, and what he works and what he suffers to be wrought with high providence in his church; to sing victorious agonies of martyrs and saints, the deeds and triumphs of pious nations doing valiantly through faith against the enemies of Christ; to deplore the general relapses of kingdoms and states from justice and God's true worship. Lastly, whatsoever in religion is holy and sublime, in virtue amiable or grave,—whatsoever hath passion or admiration in all the changes of that which is called fortune from without, or the wily subtilities and refluxes of man's thought from within,—all these things, with a solid and treatable smoothness, to point out and describe."

With such thoughts of the poet's office, Milton went on in a prophetic mood to covenant for the production, after some years, of a work "not to be raised from the heat of youth or the vapours of wine, like that which flows at waste from the pen of some vulgar amourist or the trencher-fury of a rhyming parasite,—not to be obtained by invocation of Dame Memory and her siren daughter,—but *by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim, with the hallowed fire of his altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases.*"

After this, need I seek to accumulate authorities? What more could be added to language radiant with the yet-distant splendour of the *Paradise Lost*? Leaving far beneath all the low and little estimates of poetry, it is worthy of meditation that both by Bacon and Milton the poet's function has a participation of divineness. This is in accordance with the testimony of time, as it may be discovered in language employed by various nations and in various ages. The classical student need not be reminded of the derivative sense of the title of poet,—a meaning more obvious in former days, when the old English word "maker" had not fallen into disuse. Alluding to another ancient tongue than that from which our word "poet" has been derived, a writer of the seventeenth century remarks,—

"'Twas surely prophetic that the name  
Of prophet and of poet was the same;"

and Cowper has the lines

"In a Roman mouth the graceful name  
Of prophet and of poet was the same."

A later poet, speaking of the greatest endowment of imagination, does not fear to style it

“The vision and the faculty *divine* ;”

and the common voice of mankind recognises how sacred a thing is a true poet's power, when, without any sense of profanity, it calls it by the hallowed name of *inspiration*.

In this use of words there is a meaning; for never can words live for ages on the lips of men unless they have in them the life-sustaining principles of truth. It becomes therefore a grave inquiry in what sense the poet's employment is said to be in a region of divinity. It partakes of a divineness, to borrow Lord Bacon's phrase, both in its modes of action and in the ends it aims at. The poet's chief province is invention and imagination,—the creative power of the human spirit, as described in an admirable passage of Shakspeare but too familiar to quote, bodying forth the shapes of things unknown. The boundless scope of poetic invention I hope to illustrate hereafter, when we come to survey the creative energy in all its varied forms of our English poets, better than now by abstract description. Poetry, as the word originally signified, is *creation*, and in this (let it reverently be said) lies its divinity. It is creative;—not by step-by-step attainments of the reasoning faculties, but by processes which philosophy has not yet analyzed. I do not question that imagination, like the other intellectual powers, has its laws; but so rare is the endowment in its high degree that mental science has devised no theory explanatory of its mode of action. For instance, the visionary world that Shakspeare called into existence and peopled

with creations is mysterious if the attempt is made to explain it apart from the action of the imagination. Even then, accustomed as men are to regard chiefly the more subordinate operations of the mind, it raises admiration to see how, taking names and events obscure by a remote antiquity, he has animated them with more of life and of truth than ever could have been gained from the chronicles or history. In God's providence over the human race, a great poet is given rarely, and therefore stands apart and above millions of his kind; and hence, when they behold him, not toiling with tedious and unsteady deductions, but scattering the light of truth from the fire kindled within his spirit, they give to that fire the name of "inspiration." But the divineness poetry partakes of is attributable also to its efficacy in accomplishing higher purposes than any other department of literature. The chief aim of all genuine poetry is to teach by imaginary examples and by the embodiment of abstract truths. The element in which poetry dwells is *truth*; and when imagination divorces itself from that relation it declines into the neighbourhood of empty fictions or the dreams of lunacy. But there is a prevalent notion that imagination is the power that especially draws away from truth; and hence it is looked on with apprehensive distrust. Doubtless it is liable to grievous abuse; and so, let it be remembered, is every talent committed to man, for cultivation or for culpable neglect. But, when the inventions of poetic genius are confounded with falsehood, it is prejudice and vulgar error. It is a narrow conception of truth which confines it to what are called matters of fact,—events which have actually transpired, and which would exclude even the truths of exact science. There are truths of our inner life as well as of

the outward,—spiritual and visionary,—of the imagination and the feelings as well as of the senses. The record of a criminal trial, with all the details of evidence fortified by the sanction of an oath, is matter-of-fact truth; and yet there is a higher and better truth—more of the essence of truth, and therefore more permanent—in the imaginative story of the conscience-stricken agonies of Macbeth,—the blood-stained hauntings of remorse pursuing its victim as he is plunged lower and lower in the depths of crime. What actual incidents are more true than the tumultuous heart-breaking of King Lear? “Facts are fleeting, perishable things; but the spiritual creations of a true poet’s imagination are truths that wake to perish never!”

The prime virtue of all the imitative arts—painting and sculpture as well as poetry—is the representation of their archetypes imaginatively. The characteristic of the productions of a genuine artist is the predominance of imagination, without which they sink into servile and mechanical copying; and it can scarcely escape the observation of any one who will examine the style of a portrait from a master’s hand, and that of an inferior artist, that the exactness of a likeness mechanically identical with its original does not make the same impression of truth as those indescribable touches which appeal through the eye to the imagination. But I beg you also to observe that it is part of the very nature of each one of the Fine Arts to pause in the process of imitation at a point beyond which the beholder’s imagination, aroused by what is given, moves on unconsciously to the completion of the work. It is the painter’s part so to combine imaginatively light and shade and colour that we gaze on the canvass without a thought that the imitation of form is supplied by the instinctive



action of imagination. Again, the sculptor's part is the imitation of form; and he works in marble because its purity is the fit material for his abstractions from colour. Thus it is that painting and sculpture have their respective purposes, beyond which they do not aspire, each attaining what the other omits; and the pleasure derived from each is made up of what the eye beholds and the imagination supplies, the impression thus gained from a true work of art being that of truth in its full integrity. This is imaginative imitation. Now, there is another species of work more ambitious than either sculpture or painting; for it disdains the bounds of each; and it might be thought that if there was any mode of representing the human countenance so that there should be at the same time resemblance of form as in bust or statue, and also of colour as in painting, this would be the most excellent imitation. There seems to be a good deal of reason in this: the likeness would be so complete there would be no need for the help of the imagination and no danger of its leading astray. This would be what might be called matter-of-fact imitation. And if any one is disposed to think that it must be more true because more exact, let him compare the impression made by a piece of sculpture or of painting with that of a figure or bust in waxwork. The imaginative delight awakened by the former is changed into disgust increasing with the closeness of resemblance, producing a kind of indignation at what seems like a device to cheat the senses.

The affinity between poetry and the other Fine Arts—painting and sculpture—lies in the principle common to them all, and which is the very essence of imaginative imitation,—the blending, in all genuine works of art, like-

ness and unlikeness, sameness and difference. This, when first suggested, seems paradoxical. But, to show how essential an element difference is in such imitation, I need only remind you of the stony and colourless imitation in sculpture, and that there could be no greater outrage upon taste and the principles of the art than any attempt to remove that difference by superadding to the likeness of form the likeness of colour. Now, in poetry, the medium of imitation is the more subtle one of language, and the imagination and the feelings are to be moved by means of words as the painter moves them by the visible tints upon the canvass or the sculptor by marble. The impression made by a great poem and a great painting or statue are kindred and analogous: having a common origin in the creative energy of genius, they are addressed to the same faculty of imagination, and therefore the spiritual agency of all of them is alike. How close is this affinity may be shown by the compositions in which poets convey the impressions made on them by the other arts. A picture, for instance, of two females, by Leonardo da Vinci, has occasioned these lines, in which a woman's imagination has made words subserve the purpose of the canvass:—

“The lady Blanche, regardless of all her lover's fears,  
To the Ursuline convent hastens, and long the abbess hears:—  
‘Oh, Blanche, my child, repent ye of the courtly life ye lead!’  
Blanche looked on a rose-bud, and little seemed to heed.  
She looked on the rose-bud, she looked round, and thought  
On all her heart had whispered and all the nun had taught:—  
‘I am worshippéd by lovers, and brightly shines my fame;  
All Christendom resoundeth the noble Blanche's name!  
Nor shall I quickly wither, like the rose-bud from the tree,  
My queen-like graces shining when my beauty's gone from me.

\* Mr. Co. Gibson the English Sculptor, has very successfully coloured a statue of Pallas Athena. The idea seems to have been suggested by the ancient.

But, when the sculptured marble is rais'd o'er my head,  
 And the matchless Blanche lies lifeless among the noble dead,  
 This saintly Lady Abbess hath made me justly fear  
 It nothing will avail me that I was worshipp'd here."

Within the last two hours I have had the gratification of viewing an exquisite piece of art, which has presented to my mind the finest illustration I have ever met with of the affinity between poetry and other imitative arts. The work alluded to, I am proud to say, graces the home of a Philadelphia gentleman,—one to whose enlightened patronage the cause of the Fine Arts is greatly indebted. It is a piece of statuary embodying a sculptor's happy imagination who probably had no thought that the same conception had been embodied by a poet's words,—a passage in the "Excursion" presenting the same image:—

"I have seen  
 A curious child, who dwelt upon a tract  
 Of inland ground, applying to her ear  
 The convolutions of a smooth-lipped shell,  
 To which, in silence hushed, her very soul  
 Listened intensely, and her countenance soon  
 Brightened with joy; for, murmuring from within,  
 Were heard sonorous cadences, whereby,  
 To her belief, the monitor expressed  
 Mysterious union with its native sea."

Nor can I omit the fine description, by Landor, of the

"Sinuous shells of pearly hue  
 Within, and they that lustre have imbibed  
 In the sun's palace-porch, where, when unyoked,  
 His chariot-wheel stands midway in the wave.  
 Shake one, and it awakens; then apply  
 Its polished lips to your attentive ear,  
 And it remembers its august abodes,  
 And murmurs, as the ocean murmurs there."

*\* Not Carving - Fisher's - 1840 - 1841*

I have spoken of the necessity of some element of difference in all the arts; and, before dismissing this part of the subject, it is proper to inquire what constitutes that difference in poetic imitation. Poetry is separated by a bright distinguishing-line from ordinary language, inasmuch as it not only appropriates to itself the choicest forms of speech, but also the additional graces of metrical harmony. There is thus acquired a power peculiar to poetry in comparison with other compositions; for it is enabled to address itself to man's natural susceptibility to the beauty of a regular succession of harmonious sounds, and thus music is brought into alliance. It has been frequently suggested that the most ancient poets were led to adopt a metrical form, to enable their hearers, in a barbarous age, more easily to recollect their compositions. If poetry were like the familiar rhymes employed to recall the number of days in each month, the theory might be true; but, otherwise, it seems to me rather a shallow one. The truth lies deeper,—in the influences exercised over the heart by sound, when controlled by principles of harmony, and consequently concurrent and subsidiary to the aims of true poetry. Besides, the poet, speaking better thoughts and better feelings than are passing commonly through the minds of men, instinctively seeks, as their appropriate garb, a better language and a better music. The pure heart of poetry needs the voice of the purest and most graceful forms of language. I shall have occasion hereafter to illustrate the admirable adaptation of the English metres to the expression of various passions and feelings and moods of imagination: at present I can only cite a poet's tribute to the influence

of melodious though unintelligible sounds,—a tribute in strains as musical as the music they celebrated:—

“Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland lass,  
Reaping and singing by herself:  
Stop here, or gently pass.  
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain.  
Oh, listen! for the vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound.

“No nightingale did ever chaunt  
More welcome notes to weary bands  
Of travellers, in some shady haunt,  
Among Arabian sands;  
Such thrilling voice was never heard  
In spring-time from the cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
Among the farthest Hebrides.

“Will no one tell me what she sings?  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago.  
Or is it some more humble lay,  
Familiar matter of the day,—  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been, and may be again?

“Whate’er the theme, the maiden sang  
As if her song could have no ending  
I saw her singing at her work,  
And o’er the sickle bending:  
I listened, motionless and still;  
And, as I mounted up the hill,  
The music in my heart I bore  
Long after it was heard no more.”

Again, inasmuch as one great duty and labour of the human mind is the attainment of truth by the logical and analytical processes of science, it is apt to become an habitual opinion that there is no other truth than scientific truth, forgetting that it belongs to the imagination and the feelings as well as the understanding. Let not my words be perverted for a moment into a disparagement of scientific research; but earnestly do I protest that it is not all. The man of science, wedded to his analytical processes, may bring himself to look on nature with only a scientific eye; and at length the intellectual part of his being may become wholly divorced from the moral. There have been astronomers whose intellects have reached the distant spheres of the material universe and become familiar with the courses of orbs millions of miles on high, whose hearts at the same time grovelled in the most pitiable weakness of infidelity and atheism. The study of nature may be made too exclusively scientific,—the intellect sharpened while the sensibilities and the imagination are deadened. The human form, and the countenance beaming with intelligence and feeling, may to the eye of the anatomist be no more than the flesh and blood clothing a ghastly skeleton. The botanist may walk abroad with his thoughts so busied with processes of classification that the brightest verdure shall not touch his heart. To the mere man of science the rainbow may bring a train of thought on the laws of reflection and refraction, the prismatic colours and their arrangement: it may bring all this; and, if he has cultivated only the analytical powers of his mind, it may bring nothing more. But all the truth is not in the books of Optics. From childhood we are taught that the

bow was set in the clouds to inspire confidence and hope in the breasts of those who had witnessed the terrors of the Deluge, and as a perpetual emblem of divine mercy and protection. Knowing by what hand it was placed there, and for what purpose, it is no great stretch of faith to believe that there is in it—we know not how—an intrinsic power to stir in the breast of each descendant of Noah somewhat of the same emotion as it awakened when first resting on the heights of Ararat. With all this, science does not purport to have any thing to do; and, accordingly, all that it teaches respecting that phenomenon cannot touch the feeblest sympathy. But there are probably few minds so dull as not to recognise an expression of a feeling of their own in the simple exclamation bursting from a poet's lips:—

“My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky!  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!”

The inquiry may naturally suggest itself whether the imaginative truth which poetry aspires to is not above the reach of humanity and unavailing therefore to its necessities. Unquestionably, if any one goes forth into active life with an undisciplined imagination, expecting from the world what the world cannot give, the result is as disastrous as the aim is irrational. But if the heart take counsel of imagination for the guidance of its passions, the chastening and elevating of its affections, there is no danger in the *height* of the imaginative standard.

In proof of this position there has been conclusively quoted that precept of the Saviour's which bids men, with all the accumulation of their faculties, "Be perfect," and, more than that, sets before them for imitation the model inimitable of God's own perfection. The precept may with difficulty be reconciled with the rules of our calculating faculties, but it is addressed to the imagination and comprehended by it. It stands the most sublime of all the divine sentences in the Sermon on the Mount,—the most ennobling and elevating words ever spoken to poor humanity. It may also be noticed, in vindication of the calumniated power under discussion, that the Christian rule for the guidance of our conduct to others is addressed to the imagination; and thus you may see that one evil of a sluggish imagination will be a sluggish sympathy with our fellow-beings.

But the energies of poetry are employed not only in invention, but in the discovery of truth:—not only, in Lord Bacon's words, "for the invention of a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety," but to revive the neglected glories of the world as it is, to gather the fragments of splendour from amid the ruins of our fallen nature, to lift from the soul the weight of custom and materialism, to awaken a consciousness to the neglected emotions of daily life, and to trace the associations between the universe of sense and the spiritual life within us. These are the aims of true poetry; and to grasp the thoughts and feelings which are perpetually flitting across the mind, eluding the touch of a gross philosophy, there are a thousand influences at work, which in the pride of our calculating faculties are despised, because they are not susceptible of measurement by the under-



standing. Will any one who has reflected on the constitution of man, both spiritual and material, and the world in which he is placed, venture to say, for instance, that the sun travels his glorious course only to light men to their work and give them warmth? Why then does he rise in such magnificence and why set with such ever-varying splendour? Why is it that every unclouded night ten thousand stars are looking down upon us from the heavens? Why is it that even the storm comes arrayed with a sublimity of its own? Why does the earth break forth from its winter's torpor in all the luxuriance of spring? And why is there beauty in the human countenance? Men and women would no doubt accomplish their work as well and be as *useful* if every face we looked on was the face of ugliness. Influences that cannot be expounded are active on every side and during every period of life; and, though unimportant when mentioned separately, no one can divine how great is their sway in the formation of human character. Who can explain how music falling on the ear moves the spirit within us? and yet we know that it can give courage in the hour of battle and fervour to acts of devotion. I cannot tell how the soft blue of an unclouded sky so impresses the feelings with a sense of its placid beauty that the heart of him who looks up to it from amidst the turmoil of life is touched as with a blessing; but this I know:—that, when God foretold the curses with which he would visit his rebellious people, among the penalties announced by the inspired lawgiver there was a threat that the sky should be to them like brass.

It is the poet's duty to deepen human sympathies and to enlarge their sphere; to cast a light upon the com-

mon heart of the whole race; to calm the anxieties and to sustain the highest and farthest purposes of our being. Imagination, the prime nourisher of hope, is the characteristic of man as a progressive creature; and its most strenuous efforts are given to dignify, to elevate, to purify, and to spiritualize. In the history of the literature of all nations the herald of its day is the morning-star of poetry; and, when it passes away, the last light that lingers after it is the ever-aspiring ray from its setting orb. In all ages and conditions of society it is present; for it is supplied from "the inexhaustible springs of truth and feeling which are ever gurgling and boiling up in the caverns of the human heart." Such being the purpose of poetry, it may be safely said that it is moral wisdom. Its closest affinity is with religion; for it ministers to faith and hope and love. A meek and dutiful attendant in the temple of faith, it is in humble alliance for the defence and rescue of exposed humanity. It has been sagely remarked by a philosophic writer that the belief is erroneous that the hearts of the many are constitutionally weak, languishing, and slow to answer the requisitions of things; and that rather the true sorrow of humanity consists in this:—not that the mind fails, but that the course and demands of action and life so rarely correspond with the dignity and intensity of human desires, and hence that which is slow to languish is too easily turned aside and abused. To this are all the great productions of the Muse directed, controlling the discord between the course of life and the dignity of human desires, chastening the passions and guiding them in safe channels and to worthy objects. In Shakespeare's wonderful delineation of the melancholy of Ham-

let, it is the representation of a noble heart aching with a sense of the hollowness, the insufficiency of the stale and unprofitable uses of the world to answer its aspirations. There is the wretchedness and the desolation of a spirit feeling itself at variance with life; and this morbid mood of mind speaks in words expressive of a gloomy absence of delight in all he looks upon, and yet at the same time the loftiest consciousness of the endowments of the human soul:—"It goes so heavily with my disposition, that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, this brave o'erhanging firmament,—this majestic roof, fretted with golden fire,—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form, and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!"

This is the language of disease,—of disease to which all are exposed, because, amid the frailty and corruption of our natural desires, the heart will sink down to low objects and be perverted to unholy ones. When the supplies of the heart fail and its cravings cannot find their proper nourishment, the world and all that is upon it become unsubstantial and unreal. The life, in which is staked eternal happiness, becomes worthless and barren, as it seemed to the guilty fancy of Macbeth,—“this bank and shoal of time.” It is poetry that is charged with the duty of ministering its help to this peril of humanity. Imagination, chastened and cherished, will discover dignity and happiness in life's lowliest duties,

and, rising higher, will behold—as an angel might behold—this earth with its dark sea, with all that is vile upon the surface and with the nations of the dead mouldering beneath, yet a star glittering in the firmament and peopled with beings redeemed for immortality.

If such be the nature and the power of poetry, it should not be difficult to discover some mighty influences exerted by it upon the mind of man. When we look into the region of paganism, what was the high poetry of the ancients but a struggle for something more adequate than a sensual faith to fill the caverns of the heart? When the knowledge of the Godhead, too vast for the fallen mind, was dispersed into the fantasies of polytheism,—when a thousand deities were enshrined in gorgeous temples and in the household,—when men were bowing down before images, or worshipping the sun, or fire, or whatever they might chance to turn to,—amid all these perverted creeds the most sublime aspirations, those approaching nearest to the sphere of truth, were the efforts of poetic genius. It was neither reason nor the lore of philosophic schools, but the creative faculty of imagination, that wrestled most strenuously with paganism. The moral wisdom of ancient heathendom was in its great poems. It was by the breath of imagination that the mist of superstition was broken; and ever and anon a portion of it floated upward, a white and sunlit cloud.

The philosophy of the most enlightened nation of antiquity went down, down, till it settled into the iron inhumanity of Stoicism and the imbruted sensuality and fiend-like scorn of the Epicurean; but in the domains of imagination the light and warmth of truth were never wholly quenched. On that sublime occasion when an

inspired apostle struck a blow at the superstitions of Greece, (St. Paul at Athens,) his spirit stirring within him,—for he “saw the city wholly given to idolatry,”—he was encountered by philosophers; and thus was the scornful question:—“What will this babbler say?” “And when he preached the resurrection of the dead they mocked.” Now, when the pride of pagan philosophy was thus arrayed in enmity against Christianity, I beg you to reflect upon the fact that enough of truth had been preserved in pagan *poetry* to enable that same apostolic tongue to mingle the familiar words of the Greek poets with the lessons of the gospel.

So is it in all ages. What is indeed poetry is subservient to truth and to man’s moral growth. Our complex nature—the mysterious mingling of the spiritual and the material—baffles philosophy; and, reviewing the annals of knowledge and looking only to its human sources, a deeper insight into the nature of the soul has been gained by poetry than by countless theories from the exploded dogmas of antiquity even to the latest metaphysical scheme devised by the materialism or mysticism of our own times. The light of revelation shut out, this earthly life is a long and darksome cavern; and when in imagination I behold the human race threading their way through it, I see the mighty poets, at distant intervals, the only torch-bearers in the vast procession, holding on high a light to reach the rock-ribbed roof. What is it but their truth that has perpetuated their *poems* better than all the literature of remote times, and brought down in safety the Homeric poems from an age so ancient that history has never reached it? What fact could I mention more impressive than the existence of

those poems,—at first dependent on the mere memory of an affectionate admiration, and then on the perishable records in ancient use, and yet preserved probably more than three thousand years? Their moral wisdom has won the blessing of length of days. When our thoughts seek other acquaintance than what the Bible gives with ages long ago, they travel back to Homer. Of all the literature other than what was recorded by direct inspiration he is revered as the father. In the fine lines of a living poet, little known,—

“Far from all measured space, yet clear and plain  
As sun at noon, ‘a mighty orb of song’  
Illumes extremest heaven. Beyond the throng  
Of lesser stars, that rise, and wax, and wane,—  
The transient rulers of the fickle main,—  
One steadfast light gleams through the dark and long  
And narrowing aisle of memory. How strong!  
How fortified with all the numerous train  
Of human truths! Great poet of thy kind  
Wert thou, whose verse, capacious as the sea  
And various as the voices of the wind,  
Swelled with the gladness of the battle’s glee,  
And yet could glorify infirmity,  
When Priam wept, or shame-struck Helen pined.”

If we seek to judge of poetry by recorded instances of its influence, there might be cited the classical event commemorated by Milton,—the fierceness of Spartan and Macedonian warfare checked by verse, when

“The great Emathian conqueror bid spare  
The house of Pindarus, when tower and temple  
Went to the ground; and the repeated air  
Of sad Electra’s poet had the power  
To save the Athenian walls from ruin bare.”

Or in modern history might be suggested that beautiful incident in the life of the conqueror of Canada, when, on the eve of the victory upon the "Heights of Abraham," Wolfe expressed a willingness to exchange the anticipated glory of his conquest for the fame of Gray's Elegy. But, in arguing from historically-recorded instances of poetical influences, let me refer to cases of wider operation. It is stated by Bishop Burnet, in the "History of his Own Times," that, when James II. was in very unsteady possession of the English throne, a ballad was made—treating the Papists, and chiefly the Irish, in a very ridiculous manner, and with a burden, said to be Irish words—that made an impression on the king's army that cannot be imagined by those who saw it not. The whole army—and, at last, the people, both in city and country—were singing it perpetually; and "perhaps," he adds, "never had so slight a thing so great an effect." Again, if a song helped to bring about the Revolution of 1688 and to drive the Stuarts from their dynasty, another song, harmonizing with another mood of the people's heart,—the sentiment of ancient loyalty,—was near bringing the exiled family back again. In the rebellion of 1745, when the young Pretender made his victorious march upon Edinburgh to set his banished foot on the threshold of the palace of his forefathers, the lineage of Scotland's ancient kings was welcomed to its own again; and every breeze that blew over Scotland—highland and lowland, the streets of the metropolis and the blasted heath of distant moors—brought with it the burden of the cavalier-song chanted by loyal Scotsmen to the music of the Highland Clans:—

\* *Lilly-bullers.*

“Then, Fear, avaunt! upon the hill  
My hope shall cast her anchor still,  
Until I see some peaceful dove  
Bring back the branch I dearly love.  
Then will I wait, till the waters abate,  
Which now disturb my troubled brain,  
Else never rejoice till I hear the voice  
That the king enjoys his own again.”

In proof of the enduring influence of what is addressed to the imagination, far higher authority may be adduced. In the sacred history of the chosen race of Israel, when the promised land was almost reached and the inspired lawgiver and leader was to relinquish his great charge, the command of the Deity came to him, bidding him write a *song* to be taught to the children of Israel, to be put into their mouths that it might be a witness against them in after-ages. When the Divine Providence designed to imprint upon the memory of the nation what should endure generation after generation, he inspired his servant to speak, not in the stern language of reason and law, but in the impassioned strains of imagination. *The last tones* of that voice which had roused his countrymen from slavery and sensuality in Egypt and cheered and threatened and rebuked them during their wanderings, which had announced the statutes of Jehovah, had proclaimed victory to the obedient and pronounced judgment on the rebellious,—the last tones which were to go on sounding and sounding into distant ages,—were the tones of poetry. The last inspiration which came down from God into the heart of Moses burst forth in that sublime ode which was his death-song. And why was this? “It shall come to pass,” are the words of Scripture,



“when many evils and troubles are befallen them, that this song shall testify against them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their children.” Well may we conceive how, in after-times, when Israel was driven by the hand of Midian into caves and dens,—when, smitten by the Philistines, the Ark of God was snatched from them,—when, after Jerusalem had known its highest glory, the sword of the King of the Chaldees smote their young men in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor maiden, old man nor him that stooped for age,—or when the dark-browed Israelite was wandering in Nineveh or Babylon, an exile and a slave,—how must there have risen on his heart the memory of that song, with its sublime image of God’s protection: “*As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings, so the Lord alone did bear them; and there was no strange God with him.*” or its other mighty appeal to the imagination in the threat:—“*I lift up my hand to heaven, and say, I live forever. If I whet my glittering sword, and my hand take hold on judgment, I will render vengeance to mine enemies, and will reward them that hate me.*”

When any one is disposed to undervalue poetry, it should be remembered that the one volume of divine prediction addressed to all mankind is the most poetical on which the eye has ever rested. It is the proudest attribute of imagination that, when the wisdom of God came down to earth to speak to man through inspired lips, it was addressed eminently to this faculty of the mind; and it is worth a thousand arguments in defence of poetry,—the simple fact, whether explained or no, that inspired patriot-

ism and prayer and praise and thanksgiving took the voice of *song*, and that prophecy, and even the Redeemer's lessons, are glowing with the fervour of the visionary power.

It not unfrequently happens that, the dignity of poetry and its value admitted, the subject is dismissed with the thought that what is called a *taste* for poetry is not within the power of the will to attain. The degree in which it may be acquired will indeed vary with the proportion of imagination possessed by each reader; but it is wholly erroneous to suppose that accurate taste in poetry or any of the kindred arts is other than an acquired talent. It is an acquisition by reflection and continued intercourse with the best models; it is the result of intellectual and moral *activity*; and the notion that it is a natural gift—an instinct, as it were—is the conclusion of ignorance or the fallacious plea of mental sluggishness. The fallacy has been philosophically traced to its source by a writer whose language will best serve to present the truth to you:—

“*Taste* is a word which has been forced to extend its services far beyond the point to which philosophy would have confined them. It is a metaphor taken from a *passive* sense of the human body and transferred to things which are in their essence *not passive*,—to intellectual *acts* and *operations*. As nations decline in productive and creative power they value themselves upon a presumed refinement of judging. The word ‘taste’ has been stretched to the sense which it bears in modern Europe by habits of self-conceit, inducing that inversion in the order of things whereby a passive faculty is made paramount among the faculties conversant with the Fine Arts.

Proportion and congruity, the requisite knowledge being supposed, are subjects upon which taste may be trusted. It is competent to this office; for, in its intercourse with these, the mind is *passive*, and it is affected painfully or pleasurable as by an instinct. But the profound and exquisite in feeling, the lofty and universal in thought and imagination, or, in ordinary language, the pathetic and sublime, are neither of them, accurately speaking, objects of a faculty which could never, without a sinking in the spirit of nations, have been designated by the metaphor *Taste*. And why? Because, without the exertion of a co-operating *power* in the mind of the reader, there can be no adequate sympathy with either of these emotions: without this auxiliary impulse, elevated or profound passion cannot exist."

That which is so inadequately called a *taste* for poetry is the knowledge of the abiding principles in human nature on which the art rests and the feelings which recognise their truth. It is the high office of philosophic criticism to minister to it. In the unripe and undisciplined period of taste, vicious productions will win its favour; and only with the chastened and invigorated spirit will there be congeniality with chaste and elevated models. The value of such taste is enhanced at every period of its improvement, until at length it brings that deep emotion of delight familiar to a cultivated imagination,—a rich dowry of intellectual and moral happiness. The passionate sensibility which is an element of poetic character may, indeed, increase the pains as well as the pleasures of the spirit; but another element is philosophic faith, whose happy attendants are love and hope. The dark periods are momentary because uncongenial; and

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the main portion of a true poet's existence—I speak in reference to his spiritual life—is happy above the lot of mere worldly intellects. When a late poet exclaims,—

“Most men  
Are cradled into poetry by wrong :  
They learn in suffering what they teach in song,”

it was the expression of a passing morbid sentiment. So it was but a chance and discordant mood that was meant in that noble stanza of Wordsworth:—

“I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous boy,—  
The sleepless soul that perished in his pride  
Of him who walked in glory and in joy,  
Following his plough along the mountain-side.  
By our own spirits are we deified :  
We poets in our youth begin in gladness ;  
But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.”

I shall have occasion hereafter to treat of the disordered intellect and melancholy of Cowper ; of the insanity of Collins ; of Chatterton's fearful frenzy, calmed only by the cup of poison ; of the sad part of Burns's career ; and to show that none of them had their origin in the gift of imagination. But in the pages of biography I know of nothing more sublime and illustrative of the soul-sustaining power of poetry than the hermit old age of Milton. The happy visions of his youth were followed by a tempestuous life, in which one storm of disappointment after another burst upon his devoted head. As a patriot, a Christian, a husband, and perhaps as a father, his best hopes were frustrated. In the arena of political life and in the sacred recess of home his heart was as

hopeless as his sightless eyes, but happiness communed with him in the

“Unpolluted temple of his mind.”

He went away from an age that was unworthy of him,—not to complain, not to repine, not to stain his spirit with bitterness, but to build

“Immortal lays,

Though doomed to tread in solitary ways,  
Darkness before and danger's voice behind.  
Yet not alone, nor helpless to repel  
Sad thoughts; for from above the starry sphere  
Come secrets, whispered nightly to his ear;  
And the pure spirit of celestial light  
Shines through his soul, 'that he may see and tell  
Of things invisible to mortal sight.'”

The same spiritual visitant irradiated the gifted but darkly-diseased existence of Coleridge; for from his very heart there came the gratitude of that wise acknowledgment:—“Poetry has been to me its own exceeding great reward. It has soothed my afflictions; it has multiplied and refined my enjoyments; it has endeared solitude; and it has given me the habit of wishing to discover the good and beautiful in all that meets and surrounds me.” Let me also bring the calm but earnest testimony of a living writer, eminent in another department of letters, whose life, devoted to laborious research, has produced three great historical works, each sufficient to give him fame. It is in the latest of these that Mr. Hallam remarks, “They who have known what it is, when afar from books, in solitude, or in travelling, or in the intervals of worldly cares, to feed on poetical recollections,

to murmur over the beautiful lines whose cadence has long delighted the ear, to recall the sentiments and images which retain by association the charm which early years once gave them,—they will feel the inestimable value of committing to the memory, in the prime of its power, what it will easily receive and indelibly retain. And I know not, indeed, whether an education that deals much with poetry—such as is still in use in England—has any more solid argument among many in its favour than that it lays the foundation of intellectual pleasures at the extreme of life.”

It is mental inactivity that is so fatal to all just criticism and to the genial appreciation of poetry. No one who takes up poetry as a mere matter of elegant amusement or an indolent recreation need expect to look higher than the most subordinate departments of the art. A great poem is the production of all the noblest faculties of the human mind; and what but the rash presumption of ignorance can suppose that such works are to be approached except by strenuous thought, by reverential study, and by deep meditation. In this lies the immeasurable space between poems and what are usually termed works of fiction. The common run of novels and romances are read with scarce any intellectual co-operation on the part of the reader, the gratification for the most part consisting in mere relief from vacuity of mind. The difference is as wide, too, in the enjoyment derived from the two great classes of works of imagination. That from the novel is fugitive, it being praise to say of a novel that it can be read with pleasure a second time, and a more frequent recurrence being a rare tribute to its merits.

Applying the same test to poetry, the indisposition, on the part of any one competent to judge, to peruse a poem a second time is almost equivalent to its condemnation. The higher works of the art comprehend a fund of intellectual interest inexhaustible. Nine out of ten novels, when read, are flung aside forever; while at each study of a great poem the imagination expands with the perception of new beauties and new powers. With each expansion of the imagination effected by reflection and familiarity with the classic models a deeper insight is gained into the glories of the spirit of a great poet. In the volume of the great dramatist, for instance, there are depths innumerable that have not yet been fathomed, and which remain to be sounded by an imaginative philosophy.

In bringing this lecture to a close, let me revert to a reflection previously presented:—that a prime purpose of every one who thoughtfully seeks to develop the faculties with which he is gifted should be to give to those faculties their *due proportionate* cultivation. Life is made up of an almost infinite variety of demands on the human character,—the thousand minute incidents of daily occurrence, the weightier trusts from which no one can isolate himself, and those responsibilities which, beginning here, will have their event beyond all time. A great error of human existence is devotion to one set of duties at the expense of others,—the partial formation of character, the culture of some faculties, and the wilful or thoughtless abandonment of others.

Let them be all present in a just subordination, without prostrating the other intellectual powers. I have

endeavoured to assert the majesty of the imagination, thus claiming only

“That the *king* may enjoy his own.”

The world is swayed by two principles antagonistic when divorced,—the spirit of contemplation, hermit-like seeking a retreat, and, what is more in the ascendant, the spirit of action, hurrying into the thoroughfares of society, and restless, wretched, and helpless in any chance moment of reluctant solitude. The temptation to which the mere man of letters is exposed is the disposition to withdraw from the active life in which, in common with his fellow-men, his lot is cast, into the cloister of his ideal world. I have had occasion to speak earnestly on the importance of literary cultivation; but I desire a condemnation equally earnest of the exaggeration of that importance at the cost of other duties, that pedantry which leads into the exclusive and narrow-spirited error of making literature the standard by which all things are to be measured. There is, bearing on this subject, a beautiful incident in the biography of Sir Walter Scott, to whom a young friend chanced to make a remark conveying the impression of a suspicion of poets and novelists being accustomed to look at life and the world only as the materials for art. A soft and pensive shade came over Scott's face as he said, “I fear you have some very young ideas in your head. Are you not too apt to measure things by some reference to literature,—to disbelieve that anybody can be worth much care who has no knowledge of that sort of thing,—a taste for it? God help us! what a poor world this would be if that were the true doctrine! I have read books enough, and observed and conversed with enough of eminent and splendidly-



cultivated minds too, in my time; but, I assure you, I have heard higher sentiments from the lips of poor *uneducated* men and women, when exerting the spirit of severe yet gentle heroism under difficulties and afflictions, or speaking their simple thoughts as to circumstances in the lot of friends and neighbours, than I ever yet met with out of the pages of the Bible. We shall never learn to feel and respect our real calling and destiny unless we have taught ourselves to consider every thing as moonshine compared with the education of the heart."

The most accomplished condition of humanity is that in which habits of contemplation and of action exist in harmony. The noblest eulogy was pronounced on the celebrated Sir Philip Sydney, by his philosophic friend and biographer, when he said of him, "He was the exact image of quiet and action, happily united in him and seldom well divided in any." The equal cultivation of each spiritual gift that is bestowed on us is that true idea of education set forth by Lord Bacon in a passage full of a wise imagination, closing his enumeration of the obstacles to the advancement of learning, and which in conclusion I desire to quote:—

"The greatest error is the mistaking or misplacing the last or furthest end of knowledge; for men have entered into a desire of learning and knowledge, sometimes upon natural curiosity and inquisitive appetite, sometimes to entertain their minds with variety and delight, sometimes for ornament and reputation, and sometimes to enable them to victory of wit and contradiction, and most times for lucre and profession, and seldom sincerely to give a true account of their gift of reason, to the benefit and use of men; as if there were sought in knowledge a

couch whereupon to rest a searching and restless spirit, or a terrace for a wandering and variable mind to walk up and down with a fair prospect, or a tower of state for a proud mind to raise itself upon, or a fort or commanding ground for strife and contention, or a shop for profit or sale, and not a rich storehouse for the glory of the Creator and the relief of man's estate."

## LECTURE THIRD.

### Chaucer.

The dawn of English Poesy—Difficulties of describing it—Obsolete language—Chaucer the father of English Poetry—Latin Poetry—Revival of Learning—English Language—Its Transition—Statutes of Edward the Third—Gower—Age of Chivalry—Invasion of France—Cressy and Poitiers—The Black Prince—The Church—Wiclif—Chaucer's birth, A.D. 1328—Friendship with Gower—Taste for natural scenery—The Flower and the Leaf—Burns's Daisy—Romaunt of the Rose—Canterbury Tales—Its outline—His respect for the female sex—Chaucer's influence on the English language—"The Well of English undefiled"—His versification—His death, A.D. 1400.

THE era of English poetry may be described as a period of about five hundred years. At the remote point of time forming the distant boundary of those five centuries stands a name illustrious enough to justify the usage of placing it at the head of the English poets when they are considered chronologically. A great living poet closes the catalogue.\* It is a consideration of some interest that the calendar which opens so nobly with the name of Chaucer closes worthily in our day with that of Wordsworth. It is a gratification to the literary student to know that, when he seeks acquaintance with the earliest English poets, he will encounter, not the feeble and dull productions of rudeness and mediocrity, but works belonging to the higher order of the art, and also that, when

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\* In 1841, Wordsworth was living.

he brings down the study to the literature of the present time, he will not have occasion to mourn over the degeneracy of modern inspiration. Upon each frontier of those five hundred years stands the landmark of high poetic genius. It is also worthy of remark that the history of English poetry is contemporaneous with that of the language. Almost as soon as the language spoken in England assumed a form which has continued intelligible to later generations, there appeared a poet of the first rank, who made it the voice of his inspiration. In the primitive age of English literature there is one (and but one) name of distinguished eminence. If, therefore, our subject is to be treated with regard to historical considerations, there cannot be a moment's hesitation as to the period when it is to be taken up.

The arrangement of this course of lectures is attended, in this particular, with a disadvantage to which it is proper to advert, though I am not aware that it can be avoided except by the sacrifice of more important considerations. The portion of literature in which any reader is naturally first interested is that which is accessible in the fresh and familiar forms of contemporaneous language; and it is only as the taste is invigorated and the knowledge of former ages increased that he carries his reading into earlier literature, no longer displeased or dismayed by antiquated or obsolete dialects. This is probably the course of every student in his individual investigations as he follows the guidance of his own taste. His course is against the stream of time. To obey the same instinct in presenting the subject to your consideration would have enabled me better to conciliate your attention than, I fear, I can hope to do in treating the

old English poetry. The advantage of beginning the course with modern poetry and passing by a retrograde movement into its previous eras was not to be relinquished without reflection; but, at the same time, such a method would have involved an abandonment of the advantages arising from giving to the subject somewhat of an historical form. I have therefore concluded rather to encounter the risk and inconveniences alluded to, in order to trace the march of the English Muse, and, collaterally, the rise and progress of the English language.

I shall not therefore struggle against the tide of time, though in moving with it, and setting out at a period when the language was in many respects not the English language now spoken, we must hold converse with extinct dialects,—words and forms of expression which have yielded to the same power of death which long ago conquered the lips that uttered them. It is a weary thing, no doubt, communing with our native language through the medium of dictionaries and glossaries, to meet, as it were, the curse of Babel upon our own hearth. It is painful to hear the dear voice of our mother-tongue like the voice of a stranger and an alien. The relation in which Chaucer stands to succeeding poets is that of an ancestor to a long lineage of descendants. “The line of English poets,” says Mr. Southey, “begins with him, as that of English kings with William the Conqueror; and, if the change introduced by him was not so great, his title is better. Kings there were before the Conquest, and of great and glorious memory too. But the poets before Chaucer are like the heroes before Agamemnon: even of those whose works have escaped oblivion the names of most have perished.” “*The Father of English*

*Poetry*," "*The Morning Star*," are the metaphorical phrases so tritely associated with Chaucer's name as to show the general sentiment respecting him. It could scarcely have happened that this kind of rank would have been assigned to an author of secondary merit. But it should be distinctly understood that his fame rests not only upon the fact of his being the acknowledged father of English poetry, but as one of our greatest poets.

Before entering on the question of his merits, it is proper to examine his position relatively to the literature of Europe generally and then to the language of England. The fourteenth century,—the period from the year 1300 to 1400,—it will be remembered, was the first century of the rising literature of Europe. The Latin language, which had long since ceased to be a living, colloquial language, had not fallen into the entire obsolescence of a dead language; for it continued to be the medium of communication for the learned community of all Europe. But in the time just alluded to—the latter Middle Ages—the vernacular tongues in the respective countries were beginning to assume a distinctive form, and thus to furnish to the author an instrument by which he could not only move the monastic intellect of the scholar, but arouse the neglected faculties of all to whom his writings could be made accessible in times when printing had not yet superseded the toilsome and limited labours of the copyist. In the history of modern European literature the foremost great name is that of Dante, and in immediate succession is that of Petrarch. These were men of the fourteenth century; and I have alluded to them for the purpose of showing that the little island we trace our history from was not far behind old Italy in the intellectual

career. When poetic genius, after its slumber of more than a thousand years, began to breathe again beneath the genial atmosphere of the South, the strain was quickly caught by the cold nations of the North, and the inspiration of the Muse found a fit tone in words which before were known only as the rude and uncouth dialect of barbarism. Between the death of Dante and the birth of Chaucer there was an interval of a very few years. With the second great poet, Petrarch, the life of Chaucer was contemporary. All belonging to the fourteenth century, it will be perceived that the rise of English poetry was coincident with the early era of the modern literature of Europe. The ancestral position of Chaucer in the annals of our poetry makes it important to fix in the mind a distinct idea of the period of time in which he flourished. This may readily be done by the recollection that he died, at an advanced age, in the year 1400,—the border-year of two centuries. He was an author during the last half of the fourteenth century.

Fixing the date of Chaucer's time, let us next briefly examine the condition of the language of his nation. For the information of those whose attention has not been drawn to the subject, it may be proper to state that the English language is a composite language, the chief elements being the Saxon and the Norman. It is extremely difficult—perhaps impossible—to say when the English language had its beginning, because the transformation from the Anglo-Saxon was a series of slow and gradual changes. What was the nature of those changes would be an inquiry leading me away from the present subject and too important to be disposed of cursorily. The Norman or French dialect was a great tributary to

the main current of Saxon words, and the two streams which long flowed in separate channels were at length flowing together. The earliest specimens of English writing, as distinguished from the more ancient Anglo-Saxon, belong to the latter part of the thirteenth century, not long before the year 1300; but they show a rude and imperfect condition of language. The process of formation was still going on; and it was not till the time of Chaucer that the language was saturated with the infusion of French it was capable of receiving. It must be borne in mind that changes in *written* language would not be concurrent with changes in *spoken* language. For some two or three centuries the French language was spoken by the higher classes of society in England, until it was gradually superseded by the new dialect, in which the language of the Norman conquerors was combined with the native speech of the Saxons. In all that was written the change came on more slowly:—the statutes of the realm,—the pleas in courts of justice,—the proceedings of various tribunals,—epistolary correspondence, even of a private nature,—were for a time in Latin, and afterward, and still longer, in French. Now, after the elements of the English language had, by means of colloquial use, begun to acquire a consistency and a form, it had yet to acquire a *literary* existence. And how was this to be gained? In the reign of Edward III., it was enacted by Parliament that all pleas in the courts of justice should be pleaded and adjudged in English instead of French; and yet, a hundred years after, we are told that the provision was only partially enforced. If legislation was too feeble to control the form in which judicial and technical thought was to



be clothed, nothing could be expected from it in modifying or changing the mould of literature. No; it was not for the decree of legislation or philosophy to work out this revolution,—to raise the colloquial dialect, the familiar forms of speech, to the dignity of the learned idiom in which men pronounced the thoughts they desired to perpetuate in writing,—to give honour to the vulgar English,—to set the vernacular speech (long literally the dialect of slaves) as high as the clerkly Latin and the royal, aristocratic French of the Norman nobility. The change was to be wrought by the magic influence of the poet. The poet, addressing himself to the heart of the people, needs the people's own speech. So it is in all languages; their hidden powers are first disclosed by the poets; for their theme is the knowledge which should be open unto all. Telling, in measured strains, of the passions and the feelings common to humanity, they lay aside the learned dialect, secret to all but the initiated, and reveal the unknown powers of common speech, and, at the same time, refine and improve it. The literary existence of all languages has its date, therefore, with their early poetry. The poet who contributed to this influence in a larger degree than any other was, unquestionably, Geoffrey Chaucer. He did not, however, stand alone; and the measure of his genius may be taken not only by a positive standard, but by comparison with his contemporaries, among whom stands Gower, the second in point of merit of the poets of the age of Edward III. The reign of that ambitious and warlike prince was signalized not less by the glory of foreign conquests in his wars for the crown of France than by the intellectual activity and the outbreak of imagination

which distinguished its literature. I shall have occasion hereafter to show that, as in this first era of English poetry, each brilliant period that followed was also distinguished for its national importance in a political point of view. It may perhaps impress the consideration to allude to these in anticipation. After the age of Edward III. the next great literary era was the age of Queen Elizabeth, then of the Commonwealth, then of Queen Anne, and then the late period in which England was again, as in the first period, summoning all its energies in the strife with France. As far as I may be justified in drawing a general principle from the induction, it would seem that an exalted state of national feeling was the atmosphere best fitted to sustain the poetic spirit. During the period I am treating of, the enthusiasm of the English people had been wrought to its highest pitch: they had aimed to achieve the vast ambition of their king to seize the diadem of France; and never did the pulse of the nation beat higher than when victory perched upon their banners on the plains of Cressy and of Poitiers. The manners and habits of the Middle Ages were still untouched by the changes which afterward distinguished that period of European history from more modern times. The spirit of chivalry was in its vigour, giving life to institutions and customs which have now long been obsolete and extinct. The fifty years during which Edward occupied the throne make the most brilliant half-century in the annals of England. The strong arm of the king had shaken the monarchy of France to its centre; and when that hand began to stiffen with age the sword was wielded by his illustrious son,—the bright pattern to the nobles who formed his

court and emulated the character portrayed in the lines of Shakspeare:—

“In war was never lion raged so fierce,  
In peace was never gentle lamb more mild,  
Than was that young and princely gentleman.  
When he frowned, it was against the French,  
And not against his friends: his noble hand  
Did win what he did spend, and spent not that  
Which his triumphant father’s hand had won.”

It would not be easy to point to any period when the adventurous spirit of the people was more elevated by national enthusiasm. That remarkable writer whose wit could touch without profaning a serious subject, the church-historian, Fuller, said of the long-continued war in France “that it made the English nation exceeding proud and exceeding poor.” But the chivalry of England, stimulated by the victories of Cressy and Poitiers, rested not content with those laurels. Following the banner of their prince, they penetrated into the monarchy of Castile; and, doubtless, when the war-worn soldier came home again, he brought with him legends gathered from Iberian and Moorish romances to mingle with the popular literature of his own country.

The times of Chaucer were a stirring period in the annals of the *Church*. The first great Reformer was his contemporary. It is not necessary, even were it appropriate, for me to say more on this point than that it was then that the voice of Wiclif was raised against Papal domination. The slumbering sentiments of ecclesiastical disaffection were widely agitated. The veil between the oracle of God and the hearts of the people was torn away; for the Bible was brought from the sepulchres

of a dead language and made a living English book. Not only was there the agitation of war and religious controversy, but there was, moreover, civil convulsion,—the first struggle of an oppressed peasantry nerved with the hope of freedom, when sixty thousand SERFS, bursting their vassalage, were for a brief season masters of the metropolis. I allude to these subjects very cursorily; but the student of literature must reflect on the leading characteristics of each literary epoch,—of no one more than this of the early English poetry. It is thus that we learn the influences which modify and often control the poet's inspirations, and which fashion the nation's heart to which those inspirations are addressed.

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in the year 1328, at London. He was a man of gentle birth. His education befitted his birth, and his lot was cast in noble and kingly company. His long life was spent not in monastic or clerical seclusion, but in the busy public life of two animated reigns. The royal favour of Edward III. and Richard II. was bestowed on him; and official records perpetuate the fact of his appointment to several stations, the precise nature of which cannot well be ascertained after the lapse of ages, with the exception of the one in which he was associated in an embassy to the court of France, charged with the important and delicate diplomacy of negotiating a marriage between the young Prince of Wales and a daughter of the French monarch,—probably to confirm that peace which had for a time closed the long war between the two kingdoms. There is a biography of Chaucer, written by the novelist Godwin, which fills four well-sized octavo volumes; and yet the authentic facts of his life may be stated in less than that number of

pages. Very little is known of him, and that little has less connection with his literary character. It would, in truth, be a strange thing if memorials had been preserved of any man of letters, no matter how worthy, who lived in the early ages of a nation's literature. That kind of merit was yet but imperfectly appreciated; and, besides, let it be remembered that Chaucer flourished before the invention of printing, and his labours were therefore only known by the more limited and uncertain process of manuscript. A few isolated particulars, chance-recorded, are all that can be reasonably looked for touching the lives of the early English poets. There is often a disposition to lay hold of these few incidents, and from them, by means of conjecture, sometimes plausible, sometimes preposterous, and always fantastic, to spin out a theory of the unknown life. Of the few authentic events of Chaucer's life I have stated all I mean to state,—all that appears to be of interest. As subserving the purposes of criticism, I can attach little value to the fact of his having, during one period of his life, held an office connected with the collection of customs in the port of London, with an injunction in the patent of his office:—“That the said Geoffrey write with his own hands his rolls touching the said office, and continually reside there, and do and execute all things pertaining to said office in his own proper person and not by a substitute;” for, whatever conclusion one might arrive at, whether that such an office with such a condition of tenure was adverse to the freedom of song or whether it was favourable, or, as is most probable, inoperative for either good or evil, the opinion would be no more than empty hypothesis. It is, however, of interest to know that Chaucer

was not only a scholar but a gentleman and a courtier; not because of any narrow considerations of courtly patronage, but because his intercourse with the world was calculated to give his poetry a more enlarged character than commonly prevailed. The literature of the Middle Ages was cast in scholastic moulds. The favourite form of imaginative composition was allegory, varied only by classical story or romances devoted to the celebration of supernatural heroes and their monstrous dangers and exploits. In all this there was a weary repetition of commonplaces, and, in a word, a want of the life of poetry. What seemed therefore needed to give the first great impulse to English poetry was the appearance of some one not only endowed with poetic genius and an intellect cultivated with the best scholarship of the age, but also adding to the love of books familiarity with the human heart gained by intercourse with men in the arena of actual life. Hence it is that I have attached importance to Chaucer's courtly and public career. He brought the English Muse from cloistered seclusion forth into the light of open day, and, no longer enveloping her in the veil of antiquity, he displayed her in the native freshness of her youth. In these respects the contrast between Chaucer and his most eminent contemporary, the poet Gower, is strongly marked. The chief production of Gower, bearing the Latin title *Confessio Amantis*, is a voluminous didactic poem, composed of the extinct mythology of ancient paganism quaintly intermingled with narratives from the Hebrew Scriptures and the legends of Greek and Roman story,—the adventures of Jupiter and Hercules, of Gideon and Job, of Medea and Lucretia. It consequently bears, apart from its language, the stamp of no particular time

or country, and might as appropriately have belonged to any other century as to its own.

But not so with Chaucer, whose poetry, while true to nature and therefore to all ages and climes, shows the impress of England and the fourteenth century. With his bodily vision, and with that spiritual eyesight,—the imagination,—he looked upon the world in which he lived and on the men in whose thronged company he moved; and hence

“Old England’s fathers live in Chaucer’s lay  
As if they ne’er had died. He grouped and drew  
Their likeness with a spirit of life so gay  
That still they live and breathe, in fancy’s view,  
Fresh beings fraught with time’s imperishable hue.”

One great proof of the genius of Chaucer and his superiority over his contemporaries is to be traced in this:—that he gave to his poetry a deeper and stronger sympathy with man’s actual life. Not content with the conventional topics of the poetry of the Middle Ages, he followed the guidance of his own inspirations and found nature. When we find him portraying his countrymen such as he saw them in the streets of London, and mingling these vivid but homely descriptions with loftier and more romantic themes, we trace the bent as well as the vigour of his genius, disdaining to confine the freedom of its movement to the beaten track of his metrical predecessors.

It is proof of the native energy of Chaucer’s genius that, not content with transmitted inspiration, he sought the elements of poetry in its primal sources. It was much, in an age when the poets were apt to fill their urns

chiefly from the classical aqueducts of antiquity, that one should seek the limpid fountain as it burst from the native rock or rose noiselessly in the bosom of the green earth. There are, scattered through the poems of Chaucer, allusions to traits of his own character and personal habits. The autobiographical passages in the writings of eminent men are those which are always seized on with avidity; and in the case of our ancient poet they are singularly complete. Apart, however, from these direct descriptions, there would be no difficulty in fashioning our imaginings of his personal character. He was a student, a man of books,—manuscript books, let it be remembered; for the art of printing came slowly on near a hundred years later. The habitual downcast tendency of his looks was a trait perpetuated in his portrait, and at once an effect and a sign of literary application and of the reflective cast of his mind. Conscious of this habit, he puts a pleasant allusion to it into the mouth of one of his imaginary companions:—

“ ‘What man art thou,’ quoth he,  
‘That lookest as if thou would’st find a hare?  
Forever on the ground I see thee stare.’ ”

But, while Chaucer knew well, as we learn from his own words, the student’s aching brow and sight dimmed by poring on the written page, he loved, too, with as deep a love, the fairer and more glorious book of nature. Largely did he share that element of all great poetic genius,—a passion for the outward world, that which is commonly called nature,—a passion springing from a consciousness of its influence on the spiritual part of our being. He was endowed with too capacious an intel-



lect not to know that the soul of man is fitted to the external world, and that its education comes not from books alone. The undying soul which animates each human being was breathed by the Creator into a material body,—a union as mysterious as death which separates it; and who, without impeachment of divine Wisdom, can question that agencies innumerable, felt by the physical frame, are transmitted to the spirit in its secret dwelling? It is not the providence of God to bestow such impulses in vain:—the bright colours and the fresh airs of spring, the sere and death-foretelling hues of autumn, the dirge-like tones of the voice of winter, are meant to reach, beyond the senses, to the spirit which is within. If there were times when Chaucer, with a student's intensity, hung over pages on which the wisdom of other days was recorded, there were also times when his heart beat high with the fervid enthusiasm which glows with the love of nature, partaking the emotion uttered by a later poet:—

“ One impulse from a vernal wood  
Shall teach you more of man—  
Of moral evil and of good—  
Than all the sages can.”

The poetry of Chaucer abounds with passages of great beauty and—what is essential to all—true descriptive poetry, manifesting the freshness and truth of actual observation, shown not so much in mere precision of detail as in the animation which is sure to be wanting in all secondary description. Perhaps I can cite few passages more free from obsolete phraseology than the brilliant lines containing one of his descriptions of morning:—

“The busy lark, the messenger of day,  
Saluteth in her song the morning grey;  
And fiery Phœbus riseth up so bright,  
That all the orient laugheth at the sight,  
And with his streames drieth in the greves  
The silver droppes hanging on the leves.”

It would be harsh criticism to object to the sun being designated by the cold mythological title; for it is only very recent poets that have learned to lay aside that fashion of speech. This fault—excusable in an early writer—should not disparage a description which fairly sparkles with the dew of morning.

In Chaucer's love of nature there is one element of it, as a poetic feeling, in which may be traced affinity between the earliest and the latest of the great English poets. I refer to his imaginative moralizing over even the humblest flowers that deck the bosom of his native ground,—not an incongruous combination of botany and poetry, such as the language of flowers and such fantastic devices. I am speaking of that which has a truer aim,—one development of poetry's chief philosophy in making things visible, types and shadows of things invisible. It is an utterance of imagination often scorned by intellectual pride, but precious, as any one may feel who will reflect that a few Bible-words have made the lowly, untoiling lilies dear to the whole Christian world. Chaucer's poem of the “Flower and the Leaf” is full of this gentle morality, and is as beautiful an allegorical pastoral as the language has produced. It was a tribute to that modest flower, the daisy. Afterwards the flower, honoured by the early bards, enjoyed no more than, now and then, some chance notice, like the

one tender word for it from the lips of the crazed Ophelia. And so its neglect lasted till, about fifty years ago, on the bleak side of a Scottish hill, a sturdy ploughman checked his plough; for in the mid-path of the furrow there was looking up to him the "wee," modest, crimson-tipped flower of a mountain-daisy. Within the manly bosom of that ploughman was beating the heart of ROBERT BURNS; and, though the flower was soon crushed beneath the ploughshare, it had beamed long enough on a poet's eye to inspire the most touching strain that had been breathed ever since the days of old Chaucer:—

"Cold blew the bitter biting north  
Upon thy early, humble birth;  
Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth  
Amid the storm,  
Scarce reared above the parent earth  
Thy tender form.

"The flaunting flowers our gardens yield  
High sheltering woods and wa's maun shield;  
But thou, beneath the random bield  
Of clod or stane,  
Adorns the histie stibble-field,  
Unseen, alane."

The flower and its fate called up, to Burns's fancy, associations of maiden innocence abused and ruin's ploughshare driving over the short-lived happiness of suffering merit; but this article of the poetic creed, neglected for five centuries, has been reannounced more strongly by a later voice:—

"Thanks to the human heart by which we live,—  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,—  
To me the nearest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

The deepest response to Chaucer's imaginative and thoughtful love of nature's humblest forms comes from the latest of his great successors, who has thus taken up a strain that had been hushed for near five hundred years,—a strain of gratitude as well as of poetry to the modest flower, as the origin of various spiritual emotions :—

“A hundred times, by rock or bower,  
Ere thus I have lain couched an hour,  
Have I derived from thee, sweet flower,  
    Some apprehension,  
Some shady love, some brief delight,  
Some memory that had taken flight,  
Some chime of fancy, wrong or right,  
    Or stray invention.

“If stately passions in me burn,  
And one chance look to thee should turn,  
I drink out of an humbler urn  
    A lowlier pleasure :—  
The homely sympathy that heeds  
The common life our nature breeds,—  
A wisdom fitted to the needs  
    Of hearts at leisure.

“And all day long I number yet,  
All seasons through, another debt,  
Which I, wherever thou art met,  
    To thee am owing :  
An instinct call it,—a blind sense,—  
A happy, genial influence,  
Coming one knows not how, nor whence,  
    Nor whither going.

“Child of the year, that round dost run  
Thy pleasant course,—when day's begun  
As ready to salute the sun  
    As lark or leveret,—

Thy long-lost praise thou shalt regain,  
Nor be less dear to future men  
Than in old time;—thou not in vain  
Art nature's favourite."

I have noticed the independence of Chaucer's genius in seeking the native sources of poetic inspiration; but, in doing so, I should give a false idea of his productions if I left the impression that they were chiefly of his own invention. He was a voluminous poet; so much so that the press of his country has as yet furnished no worthy edition of his entire works. During the greater part of his life his literary efforts were devoted to translating and paraphrasing the poets of France and Italy and of ancient Rome. Of these works the most elaborate was the "*Romaunt of the Rose*," a version of the French allegorical and romantic poem with that title, and the poem of "*Troilus and Cressida*," principally imitated from Boccaccio, but with large additions. Dealing with a language of which the vocabulary was yet unsettled and the metres not reduced to system, Chaucer was thus gradually invigorating his genius for the chief work on which his fame rests. It is a remark of Mr. Ellis, in his excellent "*Specimens of the Early English Poets*," that it may be doubted whether he thought himself sufficiently qualified to undertake an original composition till he was sixty years of age, at which time it is conjectured he began to execute the plan of his "*Canterbury Tales*." The arrangement of the poem bearing this title into one harmonious series was a conception that would do credit to any period of literature. If suggested, as is probable, by the "*Decameron*" of Boccaccio,—where a company is represented as having retired to a place of safety from

the raging of a pestilence and amusing themselves with tales of mirth,—it is free, as has been observed by Mr. Coleridge, from all reproach of unfeelingness to which the plan of the Italian author exposes his narrators.

Chaucer's plan was to present a collection of narrative poems, enlivened by a variety both of subject and of tone, comprehending the range of tragic and comic invention. A usage of the Middle Ages, still prevalent in the poet's day, afforded an appropriate mode of executing the idea. The work opens with an allusion to the season of the year when the mild temperature of spring tempted people from all quarters of England to journey on pilgrimages to the shrine of the sainted martyr at Canterbury. The poet, bent on the same pious errand, finds himself a lodger at the Sign of the Tabard, in Southwark, in company with the promiscuous gathering of pilgrims of various occupations and spheres of life as well as both sexes.

The prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* is an elaborate description of this company, and, beyond all question, gives the modern reader a more complete notion of the manners and customs of the fourteenth century than could by any research be gathered from historical records. The state of society, the way of life, the social habits of our ancestors, five hundred years ago, are vividly presented, with various details the memory of which must have perished had it not been perpetuated by the conservative magic of the poet. The prologue is a complete poem in itself, not presenting indeed proofs of Chaucer's highest powers, but abounding in strokes of the happiest discrimination of character, and wonderfully graphic as a delineation of life with all its actual varieties. It places the author, too, as not only one of the earliest but one of

the most successful of English satirists. The satire most genial to the gentle spirit of Chaucer is that in which the serious is blended with the playful. He was a kindly-tempered humourist, better pleased to touch with a tender hand the weaknesses of men than to task their follies and their crimes. There is in his chiding more of the placid smile of Horace than the fierce indignation of Juvenal. The various portraits in the prologue owe their effect in a high degree to the delicacy of the satirist's strokes. We see the shipman, sunburnt and managing his steed with a sailor's usual style; the prioress, with the precision of a nun, finding herself in a somewhat mixed and secular society, and with her amiable affectation of both in the pronunciation of her French and the fashions at the table, and yet withal a natural placidity shining through her assumed stateliness. In the descriptions of the sergeant-at-law and the doctor of physic, Chaucer's skill in bringing out a characteristic trait in a very few words is especially conspicuous. Of the lawyer, it is said,—

“Discreet he was, and of great reverence;  
He seeméd such, his wordes were so wise.”

With a memory stored with judicial decisions and the statutes of the realm, he is portrayed as the busiest of mortals; and then it is added, with that quiet humour which is forever jetting out of Chaucer's pages,—

“And yet he seeméd busier than he was.”

The doctor of physic is described as deep-versed in surgery, and in the natural magic and astrology which made so large a part of the medical practice of the Middle Ages:—

"Anon he gave to the sick men his (help;) Full ready had he his apothecaries, To send him drugges and his lettuaries. For, eche of them made other for to winne, Their friendship was not newé to beginne."

The satire stops not with this allusion to the doctor and apothecary playing into each other's hands; for, after an imposing list of his medical authorities, one expressive line informs us that

His study was but little on the *Bible*;"

a reproach on the medical profession the justice of which I shall not assume to discuss. Sufficient is it for my purpose, in commenting on Chaucer's powers of satire, to remark that it is a reproach at one time so current that it called forth a vindication in that curious treatise, *the Religio Medici* of Sir Thomas Brown. The same subject, with a suggestion of the cause, is also alluded to by one of the dramatic poets of a subsequent age;—

"I have heard,—how true  
I know not,—most physicians, as they grow  
Greater in skill, grow less in their religion,—  
Attributing so much to natural causes  
That they have little faith in that they cannot  
Deliver reason for."

The most exquisitely-drawn character—most pleasing in its simplicity and grace—is that of the clergyman. I can quote no better specimen of Chaucer's descriptive style, prefacing it with a remark which may give additional interest to the passage,—that it has been conjectured



that the poet had the original of the portrait in his friend, the pious rector of Lutterworth, the first of the great Reformers, John Wiclif. It has also been supposed that Dryden applied his imitation of the passage to the pious Bishop Ken; and one of the commentators suggests that Goldsmith cast his eye on Chaucer's engaging description, and accordingly transferred a trait or two of the clerical character in its brighter view to the preacher in his "Deserted Village."

A good man there was of religioun,  
That was a poore parson of the town;  
But rich he was of holy thought and work;  
He was also a learnéd man, a clerk,  
That Christe's gospel truly wouldé preach;  
His parishens devoutly would he teach:

\* \* \* \* \*

Benigne he was, and wonder diligent,  
And in adversity full patient.  
Wide was his parish and houses far asunder,  
But he ne left nought for no rain nor thunder,  
In sickness and in mischief, to visit  
The farthest in his parish.

\* \* \* \*

He sette not his benefice to hire,  
And left his sheep, accumbred in the mire,  
And ran into London, unto Saint Paule's,  
To seeken him a chantry for souls,  
Or with a brotherhood to be withhold,  
But dwelt at home and kepte well his fold;  
So that the wolf ne made it not miscarry.  
He was a shepherd, and no mercenary;  
And, tho' he holy were, and virtuous,  
He was to sinful men not dispitous;  
Ne of his speeché dangerous, ne digne,  
But in his teaching discreet and benign.  
To drawen folk to heaven with fairness,  
By good ensample, was his business.

But, if were any person obstinate,  
What so he were of high or low estate,  
Him would he snibben sharply for the nonés :  
A better priest I trow that nowhere none is."

Among the pilgrims going to Canterbury, and thus chance-collected at the inn at Southwark, it is agreed, at the suggestion of their host, that, for mutual amusement, each one shall tell at least one tale in going and another on their return from Canterbury. This is the fable of the poem, in the execution of which it was contemplated by the author to connect the narratives by appropriate introductions and by episodes prompted by the incidents of the pilgrimage. It would carry me beyond my limits to enter upon any thing like a critical analysis of this series of twenty-three narrative poems, which are finely introduced by the "Knight's Tale,"—the tragic story of Palamon and Arcite. The framework of the tales is, in most if not in every instance, borrowed from older poets, especially those of Italy; but this was a process which, as with Shakspeare, still left ample scope for originality. The mention of the great dramatic poet reminds me of another important resemblance between the constitution of his mind and Chaucer's. I mean that possession, in equal congeniality, of tragic and comic powers, which is one of the signs of the highest order of human genius. The most intelligent editor of the "Canterbury Tales," Mr. Tyrwhitt, has noticed, as a great difference, that in the serious pieces Chaucer often follows the author he borrows from with the servility of a mere translator; whereas, in the comic, he is generally satisfied with borrowing a slight hint of his subject, which he varies, enlarges, and embellishes at pleasure, and gives the whole

the air and colour of an original,—a sign that his genius rather led him to compositions of the latter kind. It appears to me, however, that the admirable pathos which is so often to be met with on his pages may well impair somewhat the confidence of this opinion; and I cannot but feel that it is difficult, if not impossible, to pronounce whether the natural bent of his genius was to tragedy or comedy. Whichever opinion may be adopted, it would, indeed, be a wrong, because a partial, judgment; for there is an order of imaginations, to which Chaucer's belongs, which is comprehensive of the whole range of human emotions, having at command alike both tears and smiles. How vain, for instance, and how shallow, would be the criticism which would seek to decide whether the characteristic power of the mind which created Hamlet and which created Falstaff was either tragic or comic, instead of a larger energy inclusive of them both! It is indeed true that there pervades the writings of Chaucer a hearty and manly cheerfulness so easy and unaffected that it suggests the thought rather of a joyous temperament than the meditative cast of mind for which he was distinguished. It is impossible to read his poetry without being impressed with a sense of his deep insight into human nature, and, besides that, his strong and well-disciplined judgment and good, plain, practical common sense. And here let me take occasion to say that I hold that habit of plain philosophy—the power of looking<sup>1</sup> at things aright—to be a trait of true genius. In the course of these lectures I shall be able—I know that I shall be able—to show you that the freaks and caprices of the intellect, perverse notions, and morbid, distempered feelings, belong to the

*secondary* order of mind, and that it is a miserable fallacy which ascribes them to genius of the first rank. I shall have occasion to deal with the productions of spirits as glorious as any that have adorned the annals of the human mind, and from them prove that the reproach of the wrong head or the wrong heart is falsely cast upon true genius. The good sense I have spoken of as a trait of Chaucer's character is finely exhibited in the course of the tale told by the Oxford Student,—the story of the patient Grisilda,—that pattern of woman's endurance,—a wife chosen from humble life by a noble husband, who is led by a strange fancy to subject her patience to trials the severest his ingenuity could devise to wound a wife's and a mother's heart. The poet gives the narrative as if his own patience could ill brook the heartless trifling with the heroine:—

“ He had assayéd her enough before,  
And found her ever good. What needeth it  
Her for to tempt, and always more and more?  
Though some men praise it for a subtle wit  
(But, as for me, I say that evil it fit)  
T'assay a wife when that there is no need,  
And putten her in anguish and in drede.”

An officer is sent to tear her child from the mother's arms and to take it away to death. After the silence of her first amazement,—

“ But at last to spoken she began,  
And meekly she to the sergeant prayed,  
So as he was a worthy gentleman,  
That she might kiss her child ere that it died.  
And in her lap this little child she laid,  
With full sad face, and 'gan the child to bless,

And thus she said, in her benigne voice,—  
‘Farewell, my child; I shall thee never see;  
But, since I have thee marked with the cross,  
Of the thilké Father blessed mayest thou be,  
That for us died upon a cross of tree.  
Thy soulé, little child, I him betake;  
For this night shalt thou dien for my sake.’”

The tone of Chaucer toward woman is the thoughtful deference of a Christian gentleman, or, to use a term perhaps more appropriate to the age in which he flourished, a Christian knight,—a spirit as remote on the one hand from flippant contempt as on the other from vapid and sentimental adoration. In the tale I have just quoted from, he adds,—

“Men speak of Job, and most for his humbles;  
As clerkes, when them list, can well indite  
Namely of men, but as in sothfastnesse.  
Though clerkes praisen women but a lite,  
There can no man in humbles him acquite  
As woman can, ne can be half so true  
As woman be.”

The writings of Chaucer have an interest in connection with ecclesiastical history; for, abounding as they do in keen and earnest satire of clerical and monastic abuses, they have truly been reckoned among the means by which popular sentiment was animated and prepared for the great change of the Reformation. The celebrated John Fox, the martyrologist, expressed surprise that they were suffered to elude ecclesiastical censorship, whose severity was spent on many less influential productions. Not to such abuses was the satire of Chaucer confined; and it is a proof of the vigour of his mind that in one

of the "Canterbury Tales," apparently prompted by a sudden indignation, he has turned the light of his genius upon the grand delusion of the Middle Ages,—the search for the philosopher's stone. The tale is a curious and elaborate representation of the sleights of alchemy, written no doubt for the purpose of rescuing the simple-minded from falling victims to vain hopes of their own and the artful impositions of others. It is conceived in a most vivid detestation of the folly and falsehood; and, with other manifestations of the same spirit, shows how largely this old poet shared that one prime element of a poet's heart,—the love of truth.

There is an important question as to the influence of Chaucer's poems on the English language. On this point, opinions the most opposite have been sustained. On the one hand, by an early etymologist he has been condemned as its chief corrupter; as having brought into the language, in the strong phrase of the writer, "cart-loads of Norman words,"—a reproach which has been repeated by many later authors; on the other hand, it is to this same Chaucer was applied the phrase so often quoted in ignorance alike of its authorship and of its application,—"the well of English undefiled." This tribute to his illustrious predecessor in verse was from the poet Spenser. The full examination of this subject would involve details not suited to the occasion. The Saxon and Norman languages, or, to describe them by other names, the English and French, were not then two distinctly-separated streams. They were beating together in stormy agitation, and no one could either control the tide or foresee its future course. It was Chaucer's fate to float upon those waves. "If," says the poet's most intelligent

editor, "we could suppose that the English idiom in the age of Chaucer remained pure and unmixed as it was spoken in the court of Alfred or Egbert, and that the French was still a foreign or at least a separate language, is it credible that a poet, writing in English on the most familiar subjects, would stuff his compositions with French words and phrases which must have been unintelligible to the greatest part of his readers? Or, if he had been so very absurd, is it conceivable that he should have immediately become not only the most admired but also the most popular writer of his times and country?"

It was Chaucer's misfortune to have only an unformed—an unripe—language; but, to prove that his influence on that language was powerful and happy, it is enough to observe the strength of thought, the variety of feeling, the delicate shades of meaning, of which he made the language expressive. It is no proof of Chaucer's having corrupted a pure dialect that the language of his poems has become obsolete, and that, too, not recently; for an English historian writing two hundred years ago remarks that an Englishman needs an interpreter to understand Chaucer's English. It is also well as wittily observed by the same writer—the church-historian, Fuller—that, if the poet left the English tongue so bad, how much worse did he find it! and, accordingly, he gives him the praise of having refined and illuminated it. It is the opinion also of a very competent judge in our own day, it being remarked by Southey that in no other country has any writer effected so much with a half-formed language. Retaining what was popular and rejecting what was barbarous, he at once refined and enriched it. The language which has not reached a firm

consistency is doomed to grow obsolete; and a poet of the seventeenth century—Waller—thus deploras the wrong done by the hand of Time to the early poets:—

“We write in sand; our language grows,  
And like the tide our work o’erflows.  
Chaucer his sense can only boast,—  
The glory of his numbers lost;  
Years have defaced his matchless strain:  
And yet he did not sing in vain.”

A literary question has also been made respecting the character of Chaucer’s versification; and it may be considered an undecided discussion, with high authority on each side, whether his verse is rhythmical, to be read by cadence, admitting a considerable variety in the number of syllables in each line, or metrical,—that is, with fixed metres and limited to ten or eleven syllables. This question is one too much of technical prosody to be more than alluded to. But, as has been well remarked by one of the disputants, “be it as it may, it is no slight proof of Chaucer’s sagacity that he should have pitched the key and determined the length of verse which, after so many experiments and the lapse of nearly five centuries, have been found to accord best with the genius of language, and that his ‘riding rhyme,’ under the more dignified denomination of the ‘heroic couplet,’ should be the measure which Dryden and Pope and their followers have preferred to all others for grave and lofty subjects.”

The extended plan of the poem of the *Canterbury Tales*, as stated in the prologue, was never accomplished; and it stands the mighty fragment of the genius of the first of the great English poets,—one surpassed in the versatility of his powers only by the unapproachable genius



of Shakspeare. The plan was wonderfully elaborate, and wonderfully achieved, too, when we consider that it was entered on by the poet at the advanced age of threescore. Life was too short for the vast speculations of the poet's imagination; for not only does the proposed series of the tales remain unaccomplished, but it will be remembered that it is over the imperfect fragment of one of them that Milton laments in that fine passage of "Il Penseroso" where he craves the power to call up the lost poets from oblivion:—

"O sad virgin, that thy power  
Might raise Musæus from his bower,  
Or bid the soul of Orpheus sing  
Such notes as, warbled to the string,  
Drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek,  
And made hell grant what love did seek!  
Oh, call on him that left half told  
The story of Cambuscan bold;  
Of Camball and of Algarsife,  
And who had Canacé to wife,  
That owned the virtuous ring and glass;  
And of the wondrous horse of brass  
On which the Tartar king did ride."

That Chaucer did not achieve all that his genius meditated was a misfortune; but the truth must not be withheld that there rests on his memory the reproach of having in some of his productions stained his inspirations with the grossness of his times. That it was the grossness of an age still rude and unrefined is the extenuation. It is a plea which may well be uttered in apology for one the general tendency of whose poetry is indisputably moral. The blemishes which disfigure it are of that kind which may disgust but which can scarcely contaminate.

His gentle spirit had its season of contrition for his poems which "sounen unto Sin," and for which he prayed forgiveness. In the hour of death the thought of their popularity was agony to him: he is said to have exclaimed,—  
"Woe is me that I cannot recall and annul these things! but, alas, they are continued from man to man, and I cannot do what I desire." The lofty aspiration of the verses considered his last composition—the voice from the anguish of a dying bed—may plead for the oblivion of the imperfection of some of his writings:—

"The wrestling of the world asketh a fall;  
Here is no home: here is but wilderness.  
Forth, pilgrim! forth, O beast, out of thy stall!  
Look up on high, and thank thy God of all."

Chaucer died in the year 1400, leaving the countless generations who repeat the English tongue a body of poetry which, if destined in the lapse of time to be wrapped in the dust of an antiquated dialect, was destined also to contribute to the development of the genius of some of the mightiest of his successors. His tomb was in the city of his birth, in that consecrated receptacle of the dead where, in honour of him,—the father of English poetry,—have since been gathered, in the Poets' Corner of the Abbey, the remains and the monuments of the family of the bards of England. "He lies buried," says Fuller, "in the south aisle of St. Peter's, Westminster, and since hath got the company of Spenser and Drayton,—a pair royal of poets, enough almost to make passengers' feet move metrically who go over the place where so much poetical dust is interred."

## LECTURE IV.

### Spenser and the Minstrelsy.

Relapse in English Poetry after Chaucer from 1400 to 1553—Its causes—The Wars of the Roses—Ecclesiastical disturbance—The Reformation and Queen Elizabeth—Wyatt and Surrey—The Sonnet—Blank Verse—Sackville—Elizabeth's reign and character—Classical learning—The British Church—Spenser's birth, in A.D. 1553—The Shepherd's Calendar—Its Allegory—The Friendship of Sydney—Spenser's Residence in Ireland—The Fairy Queen, in 1590—Sir Walter Raleigh—The great work of Spenser—Milton's praise—Spenser's mighty Imagination—Appeal to human sympathies—Chivalric spirit—Religious aim—Mr. Hallam's criticism—Hymn to Beauty—The Spenserian Stanza—Alliteration—His blemishes—The Epithalamium—Death, A.D. 1598—The British Minstrelsy and Ballads—Kinmont Willie—Sir Patrick Spens—Armstrong's Good-night.

I FEEL great reluctance to occupy one moment of your time with words of apology; for, while no one can be better aware than I am how often these lectures will stand in need of it, I trust it is the dictate of a truer modesty which prompts me to set them before you simply without pretension and without apology. There is, however, an embarrassment I cannot escape, which I therefore wish to mention in one or two words: I mean the perplexity between a desire to do all the justice I can to each subject as it rises up in its abundance to my mind, and, on the other hand, the anxiety not to trespass too largely on your

patience,—a point on which I am the more solicitous because of the very kind attention that thus far has been extended to me. The subject allotted to this evening transcends reasonable bounds, at the risk of impairing unity of impression.

It is somewhat unfortunate for the complete propriety of the metaphor by which Chaucer is so often designated, that the "*morning star*" of English poetry was not followed by the light of day. The genius of the first of our English poets shone, indeed, like the last of the starry host newly risen above the outline of some dark mountain, but not, like it, to mingle its beams with the light of the coming dawn. That early outbreak of imagination was not followed by the flood of light which flows in with the perfect day, which was still far distant.

One of the most remarkable of these relapses in intellectual advancement is the long interval between the death of Chaucer, in the year 1400, and the birth of the next of England's great poets, Edmund Spenser, in 1553. This period of more than a century and a half is comparatively a desolate tract; and, parting with Chaucer in the era of the Middle Ages, we gain companionship with no other master-spirit until within the domain of modern times. With a beauty of illustration which does not often adorn the pages of Warton's "*History of English Poetry*," he happily compares the appearance of Chaucer in the language to a premature day in spring, after which the gloom of winter returns and the buds and blossoms which have been called forth by a transient sunshine are nipped by frosts and scattered by storms.

For this blank in the annals of the English Muse there must have been causes,—some, it may be, beyond the sight

of philosophy; for it seems to me that the vast spiritual ocean of the human mind has its tides, not like the daily currents which are swayed by the near influences of the moon, but with an ebb and flood enduring for some unknown term of ages and ruled by God's hidden providence over the destinies of mankind. Without, therefore, venturing to penetrate into regions where speculation should humbly veil its eyes, there still are causes which may be assigned for the interruption of English literature during the fifteenth century:—seven reigns of disputed legitimacy, thirty years of civil slaughter, which first brutalized and then crushed the nation's heart, so that to this day the hues which the Creator's hand has given to the rose seem stained with blood. The period succeeding the wars of the Houses of York and Lancaster was not such as to give the needed repose to the nation's spirit, wretchedly wasted by its long agony. The reign of the second of the Tudors,—

“That majestic lord  
Who brake the bonds of Rome,”—

was a time of ecclesiastical revolution, calmed, indeed, during the few short years of that saintly youth,—

“King, child, and seraph, blended in the mien  
Of pious Edward.”

But the nation, crushed by the dominion of one woman, was soon to rise to its highest elevation under the sway of another. It is not my theme to discuss the character of Queen Elizabeth, to weigh her power of sovereignty with her feminine or unfeminine frailties, presenting her in

one light as described by the poet Gray,—with “lion port and awe-commanding face,” or in another, or, it may be, only a different shade of the same light,—the inimitable virago, according to the free and more familiar description of Sir Walter Scott. Enough for the present subject is it that the forty-four years during which she held the sceptre is the most glorious of the English reigns, whether the sources of that glory are to be traced to the sovereign herself, or to the wisdom of the counsellors or the courage of the soldiers by whom her throne was encircled.

In speaking of the literary interreign between Chaucer and Spenser for the purpose of a general impression, I should give a very erroneous view were I to leave you to suppose that during that period of more than a century and a half the voice of the English Muse was hushed. It did not, indeed, produce works belonging, like the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Fairy Queen*, to the highest order of poems; but there flourished those who well deserve notice before entering on the more glorious Elizabethan era.

It is usual to mark the early part of the sixteenth century as an epoch in the history of English poetry, and justly so when we consider the improvement it received from two poets who lived during the reign of Henry VIII., and whose names are scarce separable, from early and long association. They were men of aristocratic rank,—Sir Thomas Wyatt, the lover of Anne Boleyn, and Henry Howard, the ill-fated Earl of Surrey, the latter especially being esteemed one of the chief reformers of English verse. Acquaintance with the more refined poetry of Italy, acquired either by direct personal intercourse or by

study, introduced important changes into that of England. Harsh, pedantic, and unpoetical fashions of speech, an ambitious style which betrayed itself as early as the time of Chaucer and became more prevalent afterwards, were thrown aside. The language was made at once more graceful and more simple, and Italian forms of verse introduced. The sonnet was for the first time naturalized into English poetry, to prove, as I shall show hereafter, congenial with its spirit and fitted to be the vehicle of a vast variety of thoughts and emotions. The metres of English verse were more strictly disciplined; so that the merit has been claimed for Surrey of having been the first to lay aside the early rhythmical form for the more regular metrical construction. There is, moreover, due to him, beyond all question, the fame of having given the first example of *blank verse*,—that form which has proved so eminently and peculiarly adapted to the language that it has been well said to deserve the name of the *English metre*,—a construction, as we shall familiarly see in the series of these lectures, so rich and varied in its music: for it will sound to us in the mighty drama of Shakespeare, in the epic language of the *Paradise Lost*, in the more humble strains of *The Task*, and the utterance of the high philosophy of *The Excursion*.

It is worthy of notice that Surrey brought to the cause of letters an influence important in that period,—the influence arising from dignity of rank and honourable public services. He was noble by birth and by character, a courtier and a soldier; but his bright career had a destiny of blood. There is nothing in the annals of English history of which we acquire an earlier and more vivid impression than the domestic tyranny of the Eighth Henry,

—to a child's fancy the British Blue-Beard of its story-book,—driving from him his wives, the mothers of his children, and devoting more than one fair neck, once lovingly embraced, to the bloody handling of the executioner. What reign in the range of history so execrable? And let me help your hearts to a still more fervid hatred by reminding you what was almost the last act of it. Henry Howard had been in childhood an inmate of the palace,—the playmate of the monarch's child; and when he grew into manhood he was a loyal and honoured courtier and a gallant and trusted soldier. But it was Surrey's fate, and his only crime, to bear the name of Howard,—a name which had newly become odious to the despot's ear. He was committed as a traitor to the Tower; and, in the very same week in which death was slowly travelling through the unwieldy bulk of the bloated tyrant, the young poet, the gallant Surrey, at the age of twenty-seven, laid down his head to meet a traitor's death upon the scaffold.

Another copartnership in poetry, closer than that of Surrey and Wyatt and suggesting very different associations, is to be briefly noticed in the succeeding reign of Edward VI., when was produced the first metrical version in English of the Psalms of David, by two writers whose names have become the symbols of dulness and wretched versification,—Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins. It would assuredly be a bold attempt to vindicate from its long-continued reproach the poetical character of these two good men. They were indeed for the most part but sorry versifiers, in whose hands the sublimity—or, to use a more adequate term, the omnipotence—of the original Hebrew psalmody was often lost in their flat and prosaic



phraseology and clumsy metres. But it should be remembered that the translation of the Psalms into English metre is an enterprise that has never yet been successfully achieved, though even the name of Milton stands among those by whom it has been adventured. It is also to be remembered that honourable testimony has been borne by high authority to the exactness of the old version in its correspondence to the Hebrew text, and that its faults are redeemed by some passages of true poetic spirit, a vigour, a simplicity, and a dignity, befitting the lofty theme. The load of obloquy which rests on the memory of Sternhold and Hopkins should be lightened a little when we meet with a stanza such as this:—

“The Lord descended from above, and bowed the heavens most high,  
And underneath his feet he cast the darkness of the sky :  
On cherub and on cherubim full royally he rode,  
And on the wings of mighty winds came flying all abroad.”

My design, however, in adverting to this metrical version, is not to discuss its merits, but to remark that it served to incorporate, in how rude soever a form, into English poetry that wonderful series of songs which “Heaven’s high muse whispered to David,”—wonderful in its adaptation to the church in all ages and in all nations, to the church in victory or in wo, and to each Christian for all moods of devotion,—his season of thanksgiving and joy, his hours of peril and affliction and of contrite agony. It was this version that fitted to English lips the music of the royal inspired singer; and, as the homely verses were year after year familiarized in the people’s devotions, the matchless imagery of the Hebrew poetry was sinking into the hearts of the men

of England and inspiring that sacred character which is the glory of all the highest inspiration of English poetry.

Just at the close of the gloomy reign of Queen Mary there appeared one poetical effusion, showing a force of imagination which would have placed its author in the highest rank of our poets had he not relinquished his inspiration for the exclusive devotion of his genius during a very long life to the political service of his country. "The Mirrour of Magistrates" was the title of a work planned by Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, and intended to comprise a series of narratives of the disasters of men eminent in English history. The first of these, with the poetical preface, or "Induction," as it is styled, was all that he contributed; but in those few hundred lines there was an inventive energy the like of which the English Muse had not before shown, and a glorious o'ershadowing of the allegorical imagination which soon after rose in the "Fairy Queen." Sackville's "Induction" stands as the chief—the only great—poem between the times of Chaucer and of Spenser. Allegorical poetry presents no more vivid image than in that single line of his personification of Old Age,—

"His withered fist still striking at Death's door,—"

or the masterly personification of War:—

"Lastly stooode Warre, in glitteryng arms yclad,  
With visage grim, sterne looke, and blackly hewed.  
In his right hand a naked sworde he had,  
That to the hiltes was al with blood imbrewed;  
And in his left (that kings and kingdomes rewed)  
Famine and fyer he held, and therewythall  
He razed townes and threwe down towers and all,

"Cities he sakt, and realmes that whilom flowered  
In honour, glory, and rule, above the best,  
He overwhelmede, and all theyr fame devowered,  
Consumed, destroyed, wasted, and never ceast  
Tyll he theyr wealth, their name, and all opprest.  
His face forehewed with woundes, and by his side  
There hung his terge with gashes deepe and wyde.

"In mids of which depaynted there we found  
Deadly Debate, al full of snakey heare,  
That with a bloody fillet was ybound,  
Outbreathing nought but discord everywhere."

What a gloomy conception was the plan of the poem,—the stories of the miseries of the great! It was congenial to the reign in which it was composed, and has been compared to a landscape on which the sun never shines. More than that might be said. There not only hung on Sackville's poetic genius a gloomy shade, but it may be thought to have taken its colour from the lurid light of the flames of religious persecution. We may picture to our fancies this thoughtful poet turning his footsteps beyond the confines of London, on a winter's day,—the dreary season described at the opening of the poem,—wandering till nightfall:—

"The darke had dimmed the day ere I was ware:"

And what was the spectacle he might have encountered? The dispersing throng, that had just gathered round the stake where flames had wrapped a martyr's body, the fire not yet extinct in the smouldering ashes; and perhaps the desolated family—the outcast wife and children—lingering on the spot where a spiritual hero had sealed his faith. It was a fit age for poetry's darkest conceptions; and readily might Sackville frame his gloomy per-

sonification of sorrow to guide him in fancy into the realms of death and to hear from the lips of the dead the story of their woes. Under this dreary guidance, his genius entered for a brief season into the shadowy domain of imagination; but soon after he turned the powers of his mind into political service, in which he continued during the whole reign of Elizabeth and part of that of her successor, when the hand of death was suddenly laid upon the veteran statesman at the council-board of James I. It is a remarkable fact that in actual life he personally witnessed two instances of political downfall transcending any his tragic muse could have called up in his mournful poem. He was one of that judicial tribunal which pronounced the doom of Mary Stuart: it was from his lips that the unhappy queen received the message of death; and it was part of Buckhurst's stern duty to behold the last look of that royal fair one, and to witness the blow which severed from her now wasted body the head which had once glittered with the diadems of both France and Scotland. It was also Lord Buckhurst's lot—and these were perhaps the only two calamities of his long and honourable career—to sit in judgment upon the Earl of Essex when that nobleman fell from the pinnacle of queenly favour.

Referring Lord Buckhurst's poem to the time of Queen Mary, I come now to the most illustrious period of English poetry. In using the name of Queen Elizabeth to mark a literary era there is a propriety beyond mere chronological convenience. In the recorded inspirations of the Muse she fills so large a space, and genius poured forth such abundant streams of high-toned loyalty to her, that the student of literature must contemplate

this influence over the minds of her contemporaries. It would be a small purpose for me to inquire how far the literary loyalty of the age transcended its just bounds into the extravagancies of adulation. Sufficient is the fact that such, whether in excess or not, was the predominant feeling, of which, after all her pomp and power were in the grave, there is familiar evidence in our very Bibles; for she stands recorded in the preface to our English version in the glowing phrase,—“That bright occidental star, Queen Elizabeth, of most happy memory.” It would carry me beyond my subject to treat of her character; but this I desire to say,—that the school in which this sovereign was trained was the school of adversity. History presents no finer contrasts than between those two days of her life. The first, when, a culprit, on suspicion of treason, she was brought in custody along the Thames to be committed to the Tower, and, perceiving that the barge was steering to the traitors’ gate, she refused to enter that guilty portal, and, in the utter destitution of a young and helpless woman, called God to witness she was innocent. The refusal and the asseveration of innocence were unavailing; and the first intelligence that reached the prisoner announced that the scaffold had already drunk the blood of a meeker victim,—the Lady Jane Grey,—and she knew it was thirsting for hers. But the ear which is open when earthly monarchs are deaf heard her cry of innocence, and in the course of a few though weary years she was again the inmate of the ancient fortress of the metropolis. She went forth the queen of a rejoicing nation, surrounded by cohorts of her devoted nobles and multitudes of a happy people; and,

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before the crown was set upon her brow, lifting her eyes to heaven, she poured forth fervid thankfulness to the Almighty for his wondrous dealings,—for his wondrous mercies. “Wherever she moved,” says the record of this the first of her magnificent progresses, “it was to be greeted by the prayers, the shouts, the tender words and uplifted hands, of her people. To such as bade ‘God save Her Grace!’ she said again, ‘God save them all!’ so that on either side there was nothing but gladness, nothing but prayer, nothing but comfort.”

Such was the fit opening of a reign for which was reserved a glory which shall fade only with the world itself,—the glory that rose upon our race in the genius of Edmund Spenser and William Shakspeare. To the period usually comprehended in what is styled the age of Queen Elizabeth no less than about two hundred poets are assigned by a catalogue which by high authority is thought not to exceed the true number. With reference to English literature, we speak of the age of Queen Elizabeth; but it is proper to discriminate, by noticing that there was in this particular a decided contrast between the early and late portion of the reign, and that it is only the last half to which this lustre properly belongs. It is this consideration which alone enables us to reconcile with a true estimate of the times Sir Philip Sydney’s earnest complaint of the degraded condition of poetry. It was during the last twenty years of the reign that the flood of poetic light burst in: the large luminary of Spenser’s genius had scarce mounted high enough above the horizon for its beams to kindle all they touched, when there arose the still more glorious shape of Shakspeare’s imagination, like Milton’s seraph,—“another morn risen on mid-noon.” In

treating of this period of literature, the nature of these lectures will oblige me to limit my views to these two poets, the matchless types of their age, while, in doing so, I must pass in silence by not a few whose fame would have shone more brightly in a less perfect day. There was much to make the age eminently propitious to a great intellectual development. The language had gradually reached its full stature. It was not only adequate to the common wants of speech, but it was affluent in expressions which had become incorporated with it from the literature of antiquity. Classical learning in its best forms had been made, as it were, part of the modern mind of Europe; and in England, under Elizabeth, the great universities, which during the immediate previous reigns suffered from violence, which had pierced even those tranquil abodes, were gathering anew their scattered forces. The attainments of the queen herself, acquired by the superior education which Henry VIII. had the sagacity to give his daughters, (and, as it is one of the few good things to be said of him, let us not pass it by,) created a sympathy, one of many, between her and the people. Besides the treasures of classical literature, necessarily limited somewhat to the learned, there was scattered through the realm a literature familiar to the popular mind,—the Gothic, as distinguished from classical lore, the early metrical romance, the ballads, and the minstrelsy in all its forms,—tales told by the fireside in the long English winter evenings, and songs sung, as Shakspeare tells us, by women, as they sat spinning and weaving in the sun. The civil and religious condition of the country furnished another impulse to its mental advancement, for it abounded with all that could cheer and animate a nation's heart. There was the repose

from the agony of ecclesiastical persecution, and it mattered little what might be the foreign danger; for there was the proud sense of national independence and national power,—its moral force mightier than even its physical. The spiritual communion with Rome was broken forever, and England was once more standing on the foundations of its ancient British church. The Thames, his tide no longer governed by the distant waves of Tiber, “glided at his own sweet will.” The language, I have remarked, was enriched by phraseology of classical origin; but it had also gained what was more precious than aught that could come from the domains of extinct paganism. The word of God had taken the form of English words, and thus a sacred glory was reflected upon the language itself. The fitness of the language for versification had been greatly developed by the refinement and multiplicity of its metres, so that the rich and varied melody of English words became audible as the ancient rudeness of early dialects was cleared away.

The life of Edmund Spenser was nearly coincident with the last half of the sixteenth century. Born in 1553, he died in 1598. The work which won for him rank among the poets was the now almost-forgotten poem entitled “The Shepherd’s Calendar,”—a series of twelve eclogues adapted to the twelve months of the year. Having closed his collegiate career at Cambridge, he dwelt for about the space of two years in the north of England, perhaps in the region whence in this century has issued so noble a strain of poetry. One proof of the poetic temperament was here given in his susceptibility to the attractions of a fair one, immortalized, though unrelenting, under the fanciful name of Rosalind. The suit, though



unsuccessful, stands recorded in as sweet a line as ever told a poet's love: he

"Wooded the widowed daughter of the glenne."

The opening of Spenser's literary career strikes me as eminently characteristic of his gentle spirit; for there was all the modesty of genius, conscious of powers already proved by retired efforts and whispering to itself mightier achievements in days to come, and yet withal timid in trusting to the world's rude handling its secret communings with the Muse. There was no precipitancy in rushing into the arena of authorship. Not till about his twenty-seventh year was his first poem published; and then it came forth without his name, dedicated in the feigned and humble signature, "Immerito," to Sir Philip Sydney:—

"Goe, little booke; thyselfe present,  
As childe whose parent is unkent,  
To him that is the president  
Of noblenesse and chivalrie;  
And if that Envie barke at thee,  
As sure it will, for succour flee  
Under the shadow of his wing."

The dread of malignant tongues or of unimaginative indifference, painfully as they seem to have presented themselves to the poet's sensitive apprehensions, was not strong enough to silence the voice of his genius, which sought utterance, as genius always speaks, alone from its own inward promptings:—

"For, pypping low in shade of lowly grove,  
I play to please myselfe, all be it ill."

He sent forth the "Calendar" not in boastful emulation of more famous productions which had preceded it, not to gain indiscriminate applause, but the esteem of the wise and good of his own day by its deferential imitation of those whom he looked up to as the masters of English song:—

"Followe them farre off, and their high steps addore;  
The better please, the worse despise: I ask no more."

The aspirations of Spenser did not fail; he acquired not the mere favour, not the mere patronage, but that which comprehended both,—the friendship of a great and a good man,—that model of the perfect gentleman in a state of society where somewhat of the spirit of chivalry was passing away with its forms and giving place to the habits of more modern days,—Sir Philip Sydney.

"The Shepherd's Calendar" is a pastoral in little more than name; for, containing but few descriptive passages, either of the seasons or of natural scenery, it is in a great measure made up of allegorical allusions to the political history and religious differences of his own times,—the clergy of the Roman Catholic and Protestant communions being respectively portrayed under the transparent guise of two classes of shepherds. The reader of early English poetry will find in these eclogues two fables—"The Oak and the Bramble" and "The Kid and the Fox"—not surpassed in any period of our literature for the graceful pleasantry essential to that species of composition. It is worthy of remark that the phraseology of the "Calendar" is much antiquated beyond the time of its author,—so much so as to require at the date of its publication an explanatory glossary. This may be attributed partly to a desire

common to poets of various ages to give a kind of quaint dignity to their effusions by removing them from the familiarity of contemporary speech; such, for instance, as the slightly-obsolete language affected by Lord Byron in the first books of "Childe Harold." It may also be traced to the instinctive disgust with the fashionable style of the pastoral poetry in vogue throughout Europe, in which the thoughts and the expressions of courtiers and scholars were, in a language inflated, pedantic, and over-refined, put in the mouths of shepherds,—a false taste censured in one of his other poems:—

"Heapes of huge wordes uphoorded hidiously,  
With horrid sound, though having little sense,  
They thinke to be chiefe praise of Poetry;  
And thereby, wanting due intelligence,  
Have marred the face of goodly Poesie  
And made a monster of their fantasie."

In shunning this error and aiming at a Doric simplicity, the author of "The Shepherd's Calendar" ran into the opposite extreme of uncouth rusticity. This poem may be regarded as experimental of the author's powers and of the capacity of his countrymen to receive him. Ten years elapsed before it was followed by the great work on which his fame rests. During this interval the genial influence of Sydney's friendship was shed on Spenser's spirit, inspiring him to loftier efforts than his unpretending pastorals. If ever poet had reason to thank God for the gift of a true friend, it was the author of the "Fairy Queen." The chief value of Sydney's friendship was in the intellectual sympathy it gave to one who seems to have borne his genius meekly on him. It

also brought the royal patronage; and Spenser accompanied to Ireland the lord-lieutenant, the good Lord Gray, as his secretary, in which capacity he rendered services on which was conferred the grant of a large tract of land, taken from the forfeited estates of one of the Irish earls, subject, however, to the condition of cultivation and consequently personal obedience to the proprietor. For several years Spenser's dwelling-place was the ruined castle of Kilcolman, on the banks of the river Mulla, commemorated in his poems. The real value, to a scholar, of his three thousand Irish acres cannot easily be judged of; but when I consider that the English dominion over Ireland was at that time maintained only by dint of military occupation, the country, with all its goodly lakes and fair islands, swarming with the fierce untamable natives, lawless, revengeful, and treacherous, sparing no peaceful household,—the land devastated, dwellings plundered and in flames, the churches in ruins, and religion depraved,—it seems to me that the royal bounty to the poet might not unfairly be likened to a plantation in Central Florida,—as fair a region as fiercely tenanted by the prowling bands of Indians, scarce more ferocious than the native Irish whom Queen Elizabeth spent her thousands sterling to subdue. In Spenser's well-written *prose* treatise on the state of Ireland he says, "At the execution of a notable traitor I saw an old woman, which was his foster-mother, take up his head, while he was quartered, and suck up all the blood that ran thereout, saying, 'This earth was not worthy to drink it,' and therewith also steeped her face and breast and tore her hair, crying out and shrieking most terribly." When, in his immortal alle-

gory, he describes the abode of Temperance,—“a goodly castle, plaste foreby a river, in a pleasant dale, and the bruitish rabble that beleagured it,”—

“Loe; with outrageous cry,  
A thousand villeins round about them swarmed  
Out of the rockes and caves adjoining nye :—  
Vile caitive wretches, ragged, rude, deformed,  
All threatning death, all in strange manner armed :  
Some with unwieldy clubs, some with long speares,  
Some rusty knives, some staves in fier warmed.  
Sterne was their looke; like wild amazed steares,  
Staring with hollow eies and stiffe upstanding heares.”

In all this the imagination may have contented itself with the mere function of the eye looking from the ruined turrets of Kilcolman Castle. It was uncouth society and a strange abiding-place for the gentle spirit of Edmund Spenser to be consigned to; but he has left, in the prose treatise just referred to, proof that he contemplated the evil plight of that ill-fated island with a manly spirit; and we find not the petty querulousness of his personal grievances, but a patriotic zeal in the service of his sovereign and a Christian hopefulness to better the condition of his fellow-men. If the natives were savage and debased, the face of nature in the Green Isle was happy and smiling; and happier and brighter still was the country into which the poet's imagination gained entrance,—the sunny, shadowy vales, the fair lakes, with their floating islands, the delectable mountains, of *Faery Land*. Looking upon the royal bounty to Spenser as little better than virtual banishment from all he held dear in his native land, I feel sometimes inclined to regard Queen Bess as a heartless pedant, craving adulation and

yet ready to remove from her English realm its brightest ornament. But Spenser had not achieved the work which has endeared him to after-times; and, besides, the rough-hewn purpose of those who sent him into the waste places of a turbulent province was shaped to a glorious end. Happy was it that his spirit was withdrawn from the throng—from the unpropitious atmosphere of a court—to muse on spiritual creations of his own fancy and amid the imaginative forms of truth which in bright and countless legions came trooping round him.

In 1590 the first books of the "Fairy Queen" were published. The poem came forth, not with the timidity of his little pastoral, without an author's name and speeding for shelter to the wing of a benignant patron, but with the majesty of a loftier theme and a nobler inspiration. It is ushered in with a dedication bearing the name of Edmund Spenser and addressed to the sovereign,—“The most high, mighty, and magnificent Empress, renowned for pietie, virtue, and all gracious government, Elizabeth, by the grace of God Queen of England, France and Ireland, and Virginia.” There stands the name of that honoured State. There is many a reason for the lofty spirit of her sons; but it seems to me that the pulse of their pride may beat still higher at the sight of the record of “the Ancient Dominion” on the first page of the “Fairy Queen.” The poet placed it there as a tribute to her from whom the name was taken, and not less to the gallant enterprise of Raleigh and his adventurous followers. It is one of the interesting facts connected with the composition of the “Fairy Queen,” that before the poem was given to the world the course of Sir Walter Raleigh’s adventurous life

brought him to the secluded dwelling of Spenser, by whom the interview has been commemorated in verse. There are few occurrences in the history of literature on which the fancy can more pleasingly dwell than the meeting of two such men. Their characters, their varied achievements,—Raleigh, fresh from his martial enterprises beyond the sea, and fitly styled, in one of Spenser's imaginative allegorical titles, "The Shepherd of the Ocean," at one time his sword unsheathed against the ancient monarchy of Portugal, at another planting his foot on the unbroken soil of the New World and penetrating into the amazed tenantry of untamed Indians, and now greeted by the gentle Spenser,—the poet, in the maturing of his genius, having transcended bounds more vast than the Atlantic or those which Raleigh had overleaped; for he had passed the limits of time and space, and now came back radiant, as it were, with the glory he had caught in "Fairy Land." They stood together beneath the poet's roof,—the ruined castle of the ancient Irish earl; they wandered together amidst the rich foliage of the Green Island and along the banks of the river which flowed through the poet's grounds, and, mingling for years the music of its flow, with the deep melody of his strains, has become associated with enchanted fairy streams. When we conceive the soldier, "the Shepherd of the Ocean," pouring into the poet's ear the story of his Atlantic pilgrimage, the marvels of the New World,—and, on the other hand, the poet rehearsing his wondrous imaginations, his yet unfinished song, telling its story too of a world, like America, newly discovered,—the brilliant and boundless realms of Fairy Land,—we can almost imagine these two gifted mor-

tals, like the inhabitants of two different planets, meeting on this dim spot which men call earth, and revealing to each other the respective glories of their abodes.

The friendship of Raleigh supplied the loss of Sydney, who had met his honourable death in battle, dying without witnessing Spenser's great achievements in verse. When the poem of the "Fairy Queen" came forth it was introduced with a magnificence characteristic of the age; for it was not only dedicated to the sovereign, but was prefaced by a series of introductory verses addressed to the most illustrious statesmen and soldiers of her court;—to Hatton, and Burleigh, and Essex; Howard, and Walsingham, and Raleigh; to Buckhurst, whose muse had slumbered since the noble effort which I have before spoken of; and not only to all these, but, with a truth and affection worthy of the poet, to the mourning sister of his lost friend, Sir Philip Sydney; and closing with an address, full of the chivalrous gallantry of his age, "to all the gracious and beautiful ladies of the court."

Having now reached the confines of Spenser's chief production, my mind pauses with somewhat of dismay at the magnitude of the theme before me. When I consider the vast plan of the poem and the multitude of passages of surpassing energy and beauty, it is impossible to escape the feeling of the inadequacy of criticism to a faithful portraiture of Spenser's genius. Were I to attempt to convey a general idea in one comprehensive sentence, it would be by saying that the "Fairy Queen" was the great emanation of the imagination of Protestant England in the sixteenth century. When Queen Elizabeth, at the opening of her reign, made her public entrance



into London, a pageant was prepared in Cheapside, where Time accosted her, leading by the hand his daughter Truth, and Truth presented the monarch with the English Bible, upon which was written "*Verbum Veritatis*." That fanciful ceremony was a type of the state of popular thought and feeling which in its highest mood, as exalted by imagination, produced the great allegorical poem under consideration. The taste for allegorical poetry had for a long time been predominant. It entered largely into the imagination of Chaucer and his contemporaries, and more recently into Sackville's "*Induction*." It seems to me to have closed with Spenser, passing away—as is remarkable—in the full glory of the zenith. This poem shows the power of allegory in its true and most imaginative form,—not the spurious and insipid allegory of the imaginative personification of abstract qualities, but the expression of a covert sense under an apparent fable. The plan of the "*Fairy Queen*" is both elaborate and involved, and could scarce be stated without consuming more time than would be prudent to devote to it. Its general purpose, in the author's words, was "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline,"—a purpose so pure and so exalted that well might Milton say, addressing himself to the Parliament of England, "I dare be known to think our sage and serious poet Spenser a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas." Each book of the poem was intended to be allegorical of some virtue, such as holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, and courtesy, and each represented or defended by a knight, as the whole allegory was to be coloured by the genius and institutions of chivalry,—a chivalry, however, impreg-

nated with the spirit of Christianity, and therefore more pure and spiritual than the mere earthly system that passed under the name. The primal element of a great poet's power is the knowledge of the human heart; and, wherever his imagination may roam to gather its materials from without, there must first be communion with all that dwells in the recesses of his own soul. This meditative imagination was Spenser's in an illustrious degree; and when rising from the deep of his own spirit to look abroad, there seems to have been no spot of the knowledge of the civilized world which the vision of his far-seeing imagination did not comprehend. Sacred and profane, ancient and modern, classical and romantic, history or fable or legend, all that the ingenuity of man has devised or his memory perpetuated, are gathered together; not a promiscuous and discordant mass, but fused by the heat of poetic genius and poured out in one glowing and glittering flood. And here let me take occasion to invite attention to the prime constituent of imagination,—imagination as described by Shakspeare, "*all compact*,"—the faculty of blending into one harmonious and consistent whole the various elements it calls together. On the pages of the "*Fairy Queen*" you meet, for instance, the exploded mythology of ancient paganism and the immortal mysteries of Christian faith so shadowed forth together that the sanctity of the last is yet noways sullied by profane contact; the blind cravings of benighted antiquity are so united with the light that has been shed upon the believer's heart that all is made subservient to the cause of truth. It is superficial and unimaginative criticism which censures what it often calls the confusion of paganism

and Christianity. It is a false criticism, attributable to an incapacity to sympathize with a high and strenuous effort of imagination, and from which I shall hereafter have occasion to vindicate also the poetry of Milton. To the apprehension of philosophical criticism there is no incongruity in combinations thus imaginatively presented. When, for instance, one of Spenser's heroes visits the realms of the lost spirits, whom does he behold? In one spot, Tantalus, consumed with the hunger and the thirst of centuries, and with the dread thought of centuries to come; and, not far away, another wretch plunged in the infernal waters, washing and wringing his blood-stained hands eternally, hopelessly,—the deep damnation of Pontius Pilate. It is the poorest technical criticism which halts to notice that one is brought from the fictions of paganism and the other from truths recorded in Holy Writ. This matters not. To the fervid imagination they are both realities; for they are both images of eternal wo,—the sufferings hereafter of a wicked life.

The might of Spenser's imagination was manifested not only in harmonizing the materials his erudition had accumulated from every region of learning, but in making his creations independent of all particular time or space; giving them indeed a habitation and a name, but an existence purely imaginative, in the limitless land of Fairy, above the domains of History and Geography. He places you, as was said by Coleridge, "in a dream,—a charmed sleep; and you neither wish nor have the power to inquire where you are or how you came there." Now, in this poetic process there was imminent danger,—danger of the poet's soaring so high as to break the chain of

sympathy with the human heart of mortal man dwelling below upon the earth. His flight might have carried him into a region above the clouds,—into an atmosphere too subtle to sustain the life of man's frail spirit. The fatal ultraism of supernatural invention is the unnatural. The highest proof of the excellence of the "Fairy Queen" is to be found in its command over our sympathies; for this is conclusive of its fidelity, even amidst all the exuberance of fancy, to nature. The wondrous region teems with human feelings; it is full of humanity,—humanity refined and glorified. The supernatural realm which Spenser has peopled with the multitudinous creatures of his fancy seems like the earth arrayed in some spiritual illumination, as if man's dim and gross vision had been couched to behold the bright soldiers encamped around the dwellings of the just; as if to these bodily eyes of ours were revealed the hosts of our ministering angels; as if it were granted us to see the invisible visitants of the human soul, speeding on their errands of love or roaming with purposes of hate. When the imagination is duly kindled by this unequalled allegory it loses not its earthly sympathies; and yet at the same time it is enchanted, like Milton's Comus beholding "a fairy vision"

Of some gay creatures of the element  
That in the colours of the rainbow live,  
And play i' the plighted clouds."

And how is it that the poet, amid all the ethereal movements of his fancy, has ever held his foothold on the earth, going to the utmost verge of the fanciful and never passing the bounds which separate it from the fantastic? Chiefly by the deep insight, essential to all great poetry, into human nature,—a knowledge of that living soul given

by God's breath to the dust of the ground from which man was formed; a knowledge of the soul in the weakness of its fallen state; and—what gives to Spenser's muse her sacred character—a knowledge of the soul in the more hopeful condition of the redemption. Besides these, the chief and grand elements of the poet's power, he humanized his lofty allegory by making it an elaborate tale of chivalry; and this was in an age when the tilt and tournament had not become, like the Eglinton farce, an empty and frivolous pageant,—an age of martial excitement, the early modes of warfare not wholly superseded, and therefore the feats of arms and knightly adventures still in high repute. Another means by which the allegory was twined about the heart is to be traced in the frequent allusions to the poet's own country and its illustrious monarch, by which he has made his fairy creations akin, as it were, to British blood. Thus we have these elements to solve the earthly and unearthly characters of the magic poem. It is all fairy, and yet full of all that fills the human heart; it is full of patriotism; and, more than all, it is full of Christianity.

That Spenser designed the "Fairy Queen" as a profoundly moral and religious poem will be apparent to any one who studies it in a true imaginative spirit; and its sacred character has not been duly appreciated simply because the unimaginative reader recognises for devotional poetry only that in which the lesson is obtruded in its more direct shape,—a mode of instruction utterly uncongenial with Spenser's genius. The modest, shrinking delicacy of his nature recoiled from handling holy themes too palpably. The veiled teaching of truth accorded not only with this trait of his genius, but also with the illimitable

powers of his imagination. To the reader of devotional poetry who expects to find the piety all spread out upon the surface, the strains of Spenser will sound like the wild stories of secular romance; but to the ear of a cultivated imagination they come like echoes from the oracle of God. When the celebrated John Wesley—a man who in spiritual affairs exerted probably as wide an influence over his fellow-men as any man who has ever lived—gave direction for the clerical studies of his Methodist disciples, he recommended them to combine with the study of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Testament the reading of the “Fairy Queen.” Whether this advice was given for the copious imagery and pious sentiments, or for the abundant, fervid, and melodious diction of Spenser’s poetry, it is no weak authority; for no one knew better than Wesley how mighty an agent is the imagination in swaying the hearts and intellects of men, and the consequent importance of the cultivation of it.

The religious aim of the “Fairy Queen” is especially to be discerned in the first book, which is deemed the finest of the six, and is in itself a complete poem. The legend of the Knight of the Red Cross, or Holinesse, is an allegory as perfect in the execution as in the conception. The knight represents the militant Christian arrayed in the spiritual panoply described by St. Paul. Christian Truth, or the Church, is typified in the person of the heroine, “the heavenly Una with her milkwhite lamb;” and the poet of Protestant England portrayed Popery, or spiritual error, under the form of Duessa. My limits forbid my attempting any amplified comment on the poem; which I need the less regret, as it is in my power to refer you to an inimitable series of critical papers on

the subject from the pen of Professor John Wilson, of Edinburgh, in reference to which that calmly-judging critic, Mr. Hallam, characterizes the author as a living writer of the most ardent and enthusiastic genius, whose eloquence is as a rush of mighty waters, and who has left it for others almost as invidious to praise in terms of less rapture as to censure what he has borne along in the stream of unhesitating eulogy. These papers have great value as pieces of imaginative and philosophical criticism, written in a spirit of such glowing admiration of Spenser that I would most earnestly recommend them as the best means of extending and reviving the study of the "Fairy Queen." They are to be found in Blackwood's Magazine, beginning in the year 1833.

It is the remark of this eloquent writer that no poet ever possessed a more exquisite sense of the beautiful than Spenser. This is to be traced in his descriptions of external nature, and, in a still more surpassing degree, his portraitures of female beauty. There is no poet of whose powers isolated quotation would convey a more inadequate impression than Spenser, because it seems to have been the delight of his spirit to luxuriate in its own imaginings of holiness and virtue and beauty, and then to pour forth a long-continued strain, of which the well-sustained effect would be marred by disjointed extract. In one instance a description of a fair sylvan huntress is expanded to a hundred lines; in which, after the poet has wrought up the sense of admiration by a matchless profusion of fancy and imagery, the last touch is given to the woodland beauty in this stanza :—

" Her yellow lockes, crispéd like golden wyre,  
 About her shoulders weren loosely shed ;  
 And, when the winde amongst them did inspyre,  
 They wavéd like a penon wyde dispred,  
 And low behinde her backe were scatteréd :  
 And, whether art it were, or heedlesse hap,  
 As through the flowering forrest rash she fled,  
 In her rude heares sweet flowres themselves did lap,  
 And flourishing fresh leaves and blossoms did enwrap."

But more exquisite far than any other, rises to our  
 imagination the form of Una, radiant with the simple  
 grace of heavenly truth,—beauty beaming through her  
 sorrows as she wanders searching for the deluded Chris-  
 tian soldier :—

" Forsaken, woeful, solitary maid,  
 One day, nigh wearie of the yrkesome way,  
 From her unhastie beast she did alight,  
 And on the grasse her dainty limbs did lay  
 In secrete shadow, far from all men's sight.  
 From her fayre head her fillet she undight,  
 And layd her stole aside. *Her angel's face,*  
*As the great eye of heaven, shynéd bright,*  
*And made a sunshine in the shady place :*  
*Did never mortall eye beholde such heavenly grace."*

The high spirituality of Spenser's genius is in nothing  
 more conspicuous than his power of awakening the sense  
 of the beautiful by his imaginative pictures of what may  
 be called spiritual beauty, as distinguished from natural  
 beauty. He seems to delight in the possession, as it were,  
 of a new sense,—his mind's eye charmed with the vision  
 of moral loveliness,—an imperishable grace, celebrated in  
 his beautiful " Hymne in Honour of Beautie :"—

" Beautie is not, as fond men misdeeme,  
 An outward shew of things that only seeme.



“ For that same goodly hew of white and red  
 With which the cheekes are sprinkled, shall decay;  
 And those sweete rosy leaves, so fairly spred  
 Upon the lips, shall fade and fall away  
 To that they were, even to corrupted clay!  
 That golden wyre, those sparkling stars so bright,  
 Shall turne to dust, and lose their goodly light.

“ But that faire lampe, from whose celestially ray  
 That light proceedes which kindleth lovers’ fire,  
 Shall never be extinguisht nor decay;  
 But, when the vital spirits doe expire,  
 Unto her native planet shall retyre;  
*For it is heavenly borne and cannot die,  
 Being a parcell of the purest skie.”*

Spenser’s exquisite sense of the beautiful was, I may say of course, accompanied with as vivid a conception of the opposite images of horror and affright; to which we owe the wonderful pictures of the “Temple of Pride,” the “Cave of Despair,” and the “Den of Mammon,” demanding a strenuous effort for the reader’s imagination to keep pace with the poet’s. For instance, the abode of “Temperance” is assailed by a turbulent throng of “Lusts” and “Passions,” led on by one thus portrayed:—

“ Which suddeine horroure and confuséd cry,  
 When, as their capteine heard, in haste he yode  
 The cause to weet, and fault to remedy.  
 Upon a tygre swift and fierce he rode,  
 That as the winde ran underneath his lode,  
 Whiles his long legs nigh raught unto the ground.  
 Full large he was of limbe and shoulders brode;  
 But of such subtile substance and unsound,  
*That like a ghost he seemed whose graveclothes were unbound.*

\* \* \* \* \*

“As pale and wan as ashes was his looke;  
His body leane and meagre as a rake,  
And skin all withered like a dryéd rooke;  
Thereto as cold and dreary as a snake,  
That seemed to tremble evermore and quake.  
All in a canvas thin he was bedight,  
And girded with a belt of twisted brake;  
Upon his head he wore an helmet light,  
*Made of a dead man’s skull, that seemed a ghastly sight.”*

But I must forbear from any attempt to enter on this kind of detailed comment on the poem, which cannot be pursued without a sense of amazement at the unbounded sources of Spenser’s imagination.

The scope of these lectures has of necessity a limit in the examination of any one production of the poet’s; but there is no finer theme for me to indulge the hope of returning to in some future course, and rendering that full homage which is due to the “Fairy Queen.”

It is a common but very erroneous literary opinion which gives to Pope the merit of having carried the versification of English poetry to its highest perfection. With all the refinement of his numbers, he still falls below the author of the “Fairy Queen” in the variety, the power, and the matchless melody, of verse. The instrument which Spenser sounded was one of far greater compass, unequalled in the depth and sweetness of its tones. The fame too often given to Pope is the rightful property of his great predecessor, who, among other achievements in this department of his calling, gave to the poetry of his language that structure of verse which bears his name,—the *Spenserian Stanza*. He seems to have considered that there was due to his elaborate poem

a peculiar and appropriate metrical fashion; that it should have a voice of its own. When you come to analyze the stanza, it is found to be one of considerable complexity; and the effect on the ear is such that if the movement seems ever embarrassed, as it were, by conflicting currents of sound, occasioned by the reduplication and the involution of the rhymes, still, it passes over these obstacles victoriously in the long Alexandrian verse which gives so magnificent a close to every stanza. The following stanza appears to me, in this respect, typical of its structure:—

“As a tall ship tosséd in troublous seas,  
 Whom raging winds, threatning to make the prey  
 Of the rough rocks, doe diversly disease,  
 Meetes two contrarie billows by the way,  
 That her on either side doe sore away,  
 And boast to swallow her in greedy grave,—  
 She, scorning both their spights, does make wide way,  
 And, with her brest breaking the foamy wave,  
 Does ride on both their backs, and fain herself doth save.”

The effect is also very frequently enhanced by Spencer's revival of the alliteration, which has been employed to an excess in the very early English poetry. In his master-hand it loses its artificial and mechanical appearance, and gives often to the line a richness of sound the secret of which is not discovered till examined analytically. The Alexandrine closing of the following stanza has, it will be observed, peculiar force and beauty, resulting in part from the alliteration:—

“For, round about, the walls yelothed were;  
 With goodly arras of great majesty,  
 Woven with golde and silke so close and nere,  
 That the rich metal lurkéd privily,

As faining to be hidd from envious eye;  
Yet here and there, and everywhere, unwares  
It shewed itselfe, and shone unwillingly  
Like to discoloured snake, whose hidden snares  
*Through the green grass his long, bright-burnisht back declares."*

Unable to point to a hundred of the characteristic beauties of the "Fairy Queen" which I must pass in silence, I have no disposition to spend a moment on what are considered its imperfections. One of these is thus finally disposed of by the eloquent critic whose papers on the poem have been referred to:—"Spenser's style is said to be diffuse. So is the style of a river when it chooses to become a lake. But a river never chooses to become a lake without a sufficient reason for such change of character. It keeps a look-out how the land lies, and adapts its career to circumstances all its way down from source to sea. There you see it shooting straight as an arrow; here you might mistake it for a mighty serpent uncoiling in the sun; there you almost wonder why it is mute, till you gaze again and are ashamed of yourself for having expected voice from one so still and deep; and here you see the old tops of trees swinging in the storm, but hear not the branches creak, because of the thunder of the cataract. Just so with Spenser. One hour you see him—that is, his poetry—carelessly diffused in the sunshine and enjoying the spirit of beauty, in which he lies enveloped as in a veil of dreams; another, he winds away lucidly along flowery banks, with a sweeter and yet sweeter song as he nears the bowers on the borders of paradise; now, as if subdued by a sudden shadow, his brightness grows a glimmer, and the glimmer a gloom, and, wondering what noise it is you hear, you catch a

sight through the mist of white tumbling waves, and recoil in alarm from a monstrous sea."

The "Fairy Queen" exists in a fragmentary state. Of the twelve projected books but six are complete. There is, I think, little if any reason to suppose that the poem, according to the original plan of it, was ever finished. The tradition of the other books having perished is very improbable.

The conception was perhaps too vast to be achieved even by the powers of Spenser; and, whatever might have been effected with length of days, his life closed in its prime maturity. During the latter period of his existence his domestic happiness had been for a brief season greatly enlarged by a happy marriage, which inspired one of the most poetical of his occasional poems. The "Epithalamium" is thus characterized by Mr. Hallam:—"It is a strain redolent of a bridegroom's joy and of a poet's fancy. The English language seems to expand itself with a copiousness unknown before while Spenser pours forth the varied imagery of this splendid little poem. I do not know any other nuptial song, ancient or modern, of equal beauty. It is an intoxication of ecstasy, ardent, pure, and noble. But it pleased not heaven that these day-dreams of genius and virtue should be undisturbed." Spenser retired to his residence in Ireland with his wife,—one of the three "Elizabeths"—he has commemorated as dear to him,—his mother, his queen, and his bride. A very few short years passed over his happy home, gladdened, too, by the voices of his children. The rebellion of Tyrone broke out; Kilcolman Castle was seized and fired by the rebels, from whom Spenser, with his wife and two young chil-

dren, scarce escaped. His property, and the intellectual treasures of his unfinished writings, were in a moment destroyed; but, sadder far to think of, there perished in the flames the poet's infant child. Spenser hastened to London, and, after the lapse of a few weeks,—the inarticulate voice of his lost babe doubtless forever sounding in his ears, the vision of its tender limbs wrapped in flames forever burning on his fancy,—the author of the "Fairy Queen" breathed his last. He died at an inn: it has been said, heart-broken and starving:—this may be exaggeration;—but certainly heart-stricken and in need. Sydney was in the grave; Raleigh was far away upon the sea; Burleigh had no sympathy with the suffering bard; and Essex was not the quick friend he had found in others.

"Spenser,

For all the glory that thy copious song

Poured on the great, what did they pour on thee?"

His body was buried in Westminster Abbey, by the side of Chaucer. His pall was borne by poets; and the last honour paid to him whose genius had been so purely devoted to elevate and beautify the ideal of womanly character was paid by a woman's affectionate reverence. A monument was erected by Anna, Countess of Dorset, with this simple inscription:—"Here lies, expecting the second coming of our Saviour Jesus, the body of Edmund Spenser, the prince of poets in his time, whose divine spirit needs no other witness than the works which he left behind him. He was born in London, in the year 1553, and died in the year 1598."

In examining that literary period to which Spenser belongs, there is a department of poetry which it is necessary for me to allude to with much more brevity than contents me. I mean the Minstrelsy, which, having begun at a remote and unknown period of the language, is supposed to have flourished most in the latter part of the sixteenth century, and especially on the frontier between England and Scotland.

Let it be remembered that it was of one of these rude ballads that Sir Philip Sydney, immediately before the time of Spenser and Shakspeare, when more ambitious poetry failed to satisfy the longings of his imagination, said, "I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglass that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet."

The martial state of society among the border-population seems to have fostered a minstrelsy distinguished for the vivid energy of its strains, the boldness of its descriptions, and a wild intermixture of rough humour and simple pathos, which have rarely, if ever, been caught by even the best of its imitators. The border-life was one of perpetual danger and activity. Private feuds assumed somewhat of the dignity of national war; and the frequent themes of the minstrel were acts of lawless violence or the griefs of a widowed wife and a childless mother. The ballads have been handed down from generation to generation,—for the most part treasured only on the tablets of memory; but often in these fragments there is a force and a graphic reality which stimulates the imagination to a ready apprehension of the imperfect tale. For instance, in such a lament as this:—

“Hie upon Hielands,  
And low upon Tay,  
Bonnie George Campbell  
Rade out on a day.  
Saddled and bridled  
And gallant rade he ;  
Ham cam his gude horse,  
But never cam he !

“Out cam his auld mither,  
Weeping fu’ sair,  
And out cam his bonnie bride  
Riven her hair.  
Saddled and bridled  
And bootied rade he ;  
Soon hame cam the saddle,  
But never cam he !

“My meadow lies green  
And my corn is unshorn ;  
My barn is to build  
And my babies unborn.  
Saddled and bridled  
And bootied rade he ;  
Soon hame cam the saddle  
But never cam he !”

Among the ballads collected with such affectionate zeal by Sir Walter Scott there is one which has struck my fancy as describing the border-life with even more than the usual animation. It is entitled “Kinmont Willie,” and relates the rescue of a prisoner from Carlisle Castle by the Lord of Buccleugh:—a very gallant exploit, and, what was uncommon, effected without bloodshed.

The boldness of the Scots in thus surprising an English fortress is said to have highly incensed Queen Elizabeth, and to have endangered the peace of the two kingdoms. When Buccleugh was afterwards presented to the Eng-



lish sovereign, tradition tells us that, in her peremptory way, she demanded how he dared to undertake an enterprise so desperate; and the undaunted chieftain's answer was, "What is it that a man dares not do?"—a reply which so struck the queen that she exclaimed, "With ten thousand such men our brother of Scotland might shake the firmest throne of Europe."

At an advanced part of my course I shall have occasion to recur to the early minstrelsy, in showing how the revival of the study of it contributed to reanimate English poetry, and especially how, sinking into the heart of Walter Scott, it, more than any other external influence, made him what he was. How must the fire of his imagination have glowed with the restoration and perusal of this ballad, narrating, in its rude fashion, an adventure of his own clan, led on by an ancestor of his own chieftain,—the Lord of Buccleugh. I shall quote such stanzas of the ballad as will keep the train of the story:—

"Oh, have ye na' heard o' the fause Sakelde,  
Oh, have ye na' heard o' the keen Lord Scroope?  
How they ha'e ta'en bauld Kinmont Willie,  
On Haribee to hang him up?

Had Willie had but twenty men,  
But twenty men as stout as he,  
Fause Sakelde had never the Kinmont ta'en,  
Wi' eight-score in his companie.

'They band his legs beneath the steed,  
They tied his hands behind his back;  
They guarded him, five some on each side,  
And they brought him ower the Liddel-rack.

"They led him through the Liddel-rack,  
And also through the Carlisle sands,

They brought him to Carlisle Castle,  
To be at my Lord Scroope's commands.

“ ‘My hands are tied, but my tongue is free,  
And wha will dare this deed avow?  
Or answer by the border-law,  
Or answer to the bauld Buccleugh?’

“ ‘Now haud thy tongue, thou rank reiver,  
There's never a Scot shall set thee free;  
Before ye cross my castle-gate,  
I trow, ye shall take farewell o' me.’

“ ‘Fear na' ye that, my lord,' quo' Willie:  
‘By the faith o' my body, Lord Scroope,’ he said,  
‘I never yet lodged in a hostelrie  
But I paid my lawing before I gaed.’

“ ‘Now word is gane to the bauld keeper  
In Branksome Ha', where that he lay,  
That Lord Scroope has ta'en the Kinmont Willie  
Between the hours of night and day.

“ ‘He has ta'en the table with his hand;  
He garr'd the red wine spring on hie:  
‘Now, a deep curse on my head,’ he said,  
‘But avengéd of Lord Scroope I'll be!’

“ ‘Oh, is my helmet a widow's coif?  
Or my lance a wand of the willow-tree?  
Or my arm a lady's lilye hand,  
That an English lord should lightly me?

“ ‘And have they ta'en him Kinmont Willie  
Against the truce of border-tide,  
And forgotten that the bauld Buccleugh  
Is keeper here on the Scottish side?

“ ‘Oh, were there war between the lands,—  
As well, I wot, as there is none,—  
I would slight Carlisle Castell high,  
Though it were built of marble stone.

“ ‘I would set that castell in a flame,  
And sloken it with English blood :  
There’s never a man in Cumberland  
Should ken where Carlisle Castell stood.

“ ‘But since nae war’s between the lands,  
And there is peace,—and peace should be,—  
I’ll neither harm English lad nor lass,  
And yet Kinmont freed shall be.’

“ ‘He has called him forty marchmen bauld,  
Were kinsmen to the bauld Buccleugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

“ ‘And as we crossed the batable land,  
When to the English side we held,  
The first o’ men that we met wi’,  
Wha should it be but fause Sakelde?

“ ‘Where be ye gaun, ye hunters keen?’  
Quo’ fause Sakelde; ‘come, tell to me.’  
‘We go to hunt an English stag  
Has trespassed on the Scots countrie.’

“ ‘Where be ye gaun, ye marshal men?’  
Quo’ fause Sakelde; ‘come, tell me true.’  
‘We go to catch a rank reiver  
Has broken faith wi’ the bauld Buccleugh.’

“ ‘Where be ye gaun, ye mason lads,  
Wi’ a’ your ladders lang and hie?’  
‘We gang to hunt a corbie’s nest  
That wons not far frae Woodhouselee.

\* \* \* \* \*

“ ‘And when we left the Stranchaw bank,  
The wind began full loud to blaw,  
But ’twas wind and weet, and fire and sleet,  
When we came beneath the castell-wa’.

“ We crept on knees, and held our breath  
 Till we placed the ladders against the wa’,  
 And sae ready was Buccleugh himself  
 To mount the first before us a’.

“ He has ta’en the watchman by the throat,  
 He flung him down upon the lead :  
 ‘ Had there not been peace between our lands,  
 Upon the other side thou hadst gaed.’

“ ‘ Now sound our trumpets,’ quo’ Buccleugh :  
 ‘ Let’s waken Lord Scroope right merrilie.  
 Then loud the warden’s trumpet blew :  
 ‘ Oh, wha dare meddle wi’ me?’

\* \* \* \* \*

“ They thought King James and a’ his men  
 Had won the house wi’ bow and spear :  
 It was but twenty Scots and ten  
 That put a thousand in sic a stear.

“ Wi’ coulthers and wi’ fore-hammers,  
 We garr’d the bars bang merrilie,  
 Until we came to the inner prison,  
 Where Willie Kinmont he did lie.

“ And when we cam to the lower prison,  
 Where Willie Kinmont he did lie,—  
 ‘ Oh, sleep ye? wake ye, Kinmont Willie,  
 Upon the morn that thou’s to die.’

“ ‘ Oh, I sleep saft, and I wake aft ;  
 It’s lang since sleeping was fled frae me.  
 Gie my service back to my wife and bairns,  
 And a’ gude fellows that spier for me.’

“ Then Red Rowan has hente him up,  
 The starkest man in Teviotdale :—  
 ‘ Abide, abide now, Red Rowan,  
 Till of my Lord Scroope I take farewell,

“ ‘Farewell, farewell, my gude Lord Scroope  
My gude Lord Scroope, farewell!’ he cried.  
‘I’ll pay you for my lodging-mail  
When first we meet on the border-side.’

“ Then shoulder high, with shout and cry,  
We bore him down the ladders lang;  
At every stride Red Rowan made  
I wot the Kinsmon’s airns played clang.

“ ‘Oh, mony a time,’ quo’ Kinmont Willie,  
‘I have ridden horse baith well and wood;  
But a rougher beast than Red Rowan,  
I ween, my legs have ne’er bestrode.

‘And mony a time,’ quo’ Kinmont Willie,  
‘I’ve pricked a horse out ower the firs,  
But, since the day I backed a steed,  
I never wore sic cumbrous spurs.’

“ We scarce had won the Hanshaw bank,  
When a’ the Carlisle bells were rung,  
And a thousand men on horse and foot  
Cam wi’ the keen Lord Scroope along

“ Buccleugh has turned to Eden Water,  
Even where it flowed frae bank to brim,  
And he has plunged in wi’ a’ his band,  
And safely swam them through the stream.

“ He turned him on the other side,  
And at Lord Scroope his glove flung he:—  
‘If ye like na’ my visit in merry England,  
In fair Scotland come visit me.’

“ All sore astonished stood Lord Scroope;  
He stood as still as rock of stane;  
He scarcely dared to trew his eyes  
When through the water they had gane.

“ ‘He is either himself, a (diel from below;)   
 Or else his mother a witch maun be;   
 I wadna’ hae’ ridden that wean water   
 For a’ the gowd in Christentie.’ ”

As fine a specimen of the ancient minstrelsy as can be given is what Coleridge called “the grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spens.” It is one of the historical ballads the precise occasion of which is wrapped, however, in mystery, except that it has some relation to the Scottish princess who was seated on the throne of Norway, thus occasioning an intercourse between those two countries.

It is a noble example of the unknown minstrel’s powers of description:—

“ The king sits in Dunfermline town,   
 Drinking the blude-red wine;   
 ‘Oh, where will I get a skuly skipper   
 To sail this new ship of mine?’ ”

“ Oh, up and spake an eldern knight   
 Sat at the king’s right knee:—   
 ‘Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor   
 That ever sailed the sea.’ ”

“ Our king has written a braid letter,   
 And sealed it with his hand,   
 And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens   
 Was walking on the strand. ”

“ ‘To Norroway, to Norroway   
 To Norroway o’er the faim;   
 The king’s daughter of Norroway,   
 ’Tis thou maun bring her hame.’ ”

“ The first word that Sir Patrick read,   
 Sae loud, loud laughéd he;   
 The niest word that Sir Patrick read,   
 The tear blinded his e’e. ”

“ ‘ Oh, wha is this has done this deed,  
And tauld the king o’ me,  
To send us out, at this time o’ the year  
To sail upon the sea ?

“ ‘ Be it wind, be it weet, be it hail, be it sleet,  
Our ship must sail the fain ;  
The king’s daughter of Norroway,—  
’Tis we must fetch her hame.’

“ ‘ They hoysed their sails on Monenday morn,  
Wi’ a’ the speed they may ;  
They ha’e landed in Norroway,  
Upon a Wodensday.

“ ‘ They had na’ been a week, a week,  
In Norroway, but twae,  
When that the lords of Norroway  
Began aloud to say,—

“ ‘ Ye Scottishmen spend a’ our king’s gowd,  
And a’ our queene’s fee.’  
‘ Ye lie, ye lie, ye liars laud,  
Fu’ laud I hear ye lie.

“ ‘ For I brought as much white monie  
As gars my men and me ;  
And I brought a half-fu’ of gude red gowd  
Out ower the sea wi’ me.

“ ‘ Make ready, make ready, my merry men a’,  
Our gude ship sails the morn ;’  
‘ Now ever alack, my master dear !  
I fear a deadly storm

“ ‘ I saw the new moon, late yestre’en  
Wi’ the old moon in her arm ;  
And if we gang to sea, master,  
I fear we’ll come to harm.’

“ They had na’ sailed a league, a league,  
A league but barely three,  
When the lift grew dark, and the wind blew loud,  
And gurly grew the sea.

“ The ankers brake and the topmasts lap,  
It was sic a deadly storm;  
And the waves came o’er the broken ship  
Till a’ her sides were torn.

“ ‘ Oh, where will I get a gude sailor,  
To take my helm in hand  
Till I get up to the tall topmast  
To see if I can spy land?’

“ ‘ Oh, here am I, a sailor gude,  
To take the helm in hand,  
Till you go up to the tall topmast:  
But I fear you’ll ne’er spy land.’

“ He had na’ gane a step, a step,—  
A step but barely ane,—  
When a bout flew out of (the) goodly ship,  
And the salt sea it came in.

“ ‘ Gae fetch a web o’ the silken claith,  
Another o’ the twine,  
And wap them into our ship’s side,  
And let na’ the sea come in.’

“ They fetched a web o’ the silken claith,  
Another o’ the twine,  
And they wapped them round that gude ship’s  
But still the sea cam in.

Oh, laith, laith were our gude Scots lords  
To weet their cork-heeled shoon;  
But lang or a’ the play was played  
They wat their hats aboon.



“ And mony was the feather-bed  
That fluttered on the faim;  
And mony was the gude lord's son  
That never mair cam hame.

“ The ladyes wrang their fingers white,  
The maidens tore their hair,  
A' for the sake of their true loves,—  
For them they'll see nae mair.

“ Half ower, half ower to Heberdom  
'Tis fifty fathoms deep,  
And there lies gude Sir Patrick Spens,  
Wi' the Scots lords at his feet.”

Let me take leave of these ancient strains with one very short fragment,—Armstrong's “Good-night,”—in which, if I have been presuming too much upon your patience, you may find a wish of your own expressed for you:—

“ This night is my departing night;  
For here nae longer must I stay;  
There's neither friend nor foe o' mine  
But wishes me away.

“ What I have done through lack of wit  
I never, never can recall;  
I hope ye're a' my friends as yet:  
Good-night, and joy be with you all.”

## LECTURE V.

### Shakspeare.

Spenser's death and Shakspeare's birth—Influence of the age—Independence of his imaginary creations—Small knowledge of the individual—Unselfishness of Genius—A spiritual voice in all time—Shakspeare traditions—His birth, A.D. 1564—Death, A.D. 1616—Cervantes's death—Epitaph—Education—Ben Jonson—Power over language—The Dramatic Art congenial to his genius—Kenilworth and Queen Elizabeth—Shakspeare in London—The Armada—His patriotism and loyalty—Subjectiveness of the modern European mind—Shakspeare and Bacon—Venus and Adonis—Lucrece—The Dramas—The Sonnets—Dramatic Art in England—Sacred Dramas—Mysteries and Moralities—Heywood—Minor Dramatists—"The gentle Shakspeare"—The acting drama—Primitive Theatres—Modern adaptations—Lear and Richard III.—The supernatural of the Drama—Macbeth—The Tempest his last poem.

At the very time when, in an obscure lodging in London, the gentle spirit of Edmund Spenser was passing away from its fresh sorrows and the worldly troubles so meekly complained of in various passages of his poems, there was dwelling under some humble roof of the same city the mightiest of his many contemporaries among the poets,—WILLIAM SHAKSPEARE. The beginning of his dramatic career dates about the time of the publication of the "Fairy Queen," not far from the close of the sixteenth century. The term of his authorship belongs not, like Spenser's, exclusively to the reign of

Queen Elizabeth, but, beginning in that reign, it survives during a portion of that of her successor, James I.

At the outset of these lectures I took occasion to recognise as one of the offices of criticism to trace the correspondence between the spirit of a great author and that of his age and country, as well as the course of his personal life. The historical and biographical illustrations have a value which no careful student should overlook; for often he will find that a knowledge of the temper of the times, the characteristics of the age, and the individual position of the author, will give a deeper insight into his genius. But, important as this process of criticism is, it is essentially subordinate to the higher functions of criticism,—the philosophy of judging the creations of genius by immutable principles of truth, above the range of all that is local, personal, or temporary. It is a prime element of the best order of intellectual endowment to dwell, sunlike, in a light of its own; and he who seeks to illustrate by external and reflected rays alone shuts his eyes to the chief source of its illumination.

The first principle which meets my reflections upon Shakspeare is the independence of his imaginative creations of all the incidents which are valuable in the appreciation of most works of genius. We know, indeed, the age and the character of the age in which he lived; but, as if to teach the principle just stated, the materials of knowledge of Shakspeare's personal history have in all important particulars been swept away. We do not even know how to spell his name,—a question of orthography on which recently in England there has been a very animated discussion, occasioned by the discovery of one

of the very rare autographs of the poet; and the argument goes pretty strongly to show that the usual way is a wrong way.

Of the man Shakspeare we know literally nothing that is of any worth for the exposition of his character as a poet. The letters which made up his name are far less symbolical of the personal existence of a human being than of the creative origin of Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear, and Cordelia, or Juliet and Desdemona, and the other realities that rise up in our thoughts at the sight or sound of the word "Shakspeare." From his individual history nothing ever intrudes to disturb the perfect impression made by those inventions into which he seems to have transferred his whole nature,—this self-forgetfulness, this unconscious self-devotion, bearing witness to the perfection of his creative powers. This transmigration, as it were, of a great poet's spirit into the characters he invents or the ideas he embodies has furnished an eloquent living divine an apposite illustration in expounding the Christian duty of self-sacrifice; and I quote the passage for its reflex connection with the subject now under discussion:—

"Whatever has been truly excellent among the products of the human mind has sprung from the very same source of all good, both in the natural and in the moral world,—the spirit of self-sacrifice. Look, for example, at Poetry. The might of the imagination is manifested by its launching forth from the petty creek, where the accidents of birth moored it, into the wide ocean of being,—by its going abroad into the world around, passing into whatever it meets with, animating it and becoming one with it. This complete union and identification of

the poet with his poem—this suppression of his own individual, insulated consciousness, with its narrowness of thought and pettinesses of feeling—is what we admire in the great masters of that which, for this reason, we justly call classical poetry, as representing that which is symbolical and universal,—not that which is merely occasional and peculiar. This gives them that majestic calmness which still breathes upon us from the statues of their gods. This invests their works with that lucid, transparent atmosphere wherein every form stands out in perfect distinctness, only beautified by the distance which idealizes it. This has delivered those works from the casualties of time and space, and has lifted them up, like stars, into the pure firmament of thought; so that they do not shine on one spot alone, nor fade like earthly flowers, but journey on from clime to clime, shedding the light of beauty on generation after generation. The same quality amounting to a total extinction of his own selfish being, so that his spirit became a mighty organ through which nature gave utterance to the full diapason of her notes, is what we wonder at in our own great dramatist, and is the groundwork of all his other powers; for it is only when purged of selfishness that the intellect becomes fitted for receiving the inspirations of genius.”

The loss, therefore, of biographical information respecting the English Dramatist ceases to be to me a subject of regret, because his genius was not swayed by time, or place, or fortune. It is a small conception which presents Shakspeare to our minds in his individual personality, limited to one tract of the earth, and one tract of time, and to one little island, one little half-century. To the

truer thought the idea of Shakspeare comes as the idea of a voice,—a spiritual voice, mighty and multitudinous, like the ocean's voice in mid-Atlantic, attuned to no age and echoing to no shore;—and, like ocean too, taking its colour from its own unfathomed deep and not from the soil of the lands it beats upon. I repeat that I know of not a single incident in the obscure story of Shakspeare's life of significancy for the study of his poetry. Yet there has prevailed on this point—naturally, too—an insatiable curiosity, the fruit of which has been the accumulation of as much rubbish as was ever raked into one heap by the industry of one impulse. I would be the last to attempt to brush away a literary tradition, no matter how remote or how frail the testimony on which it rested, did I not detect the feature of a falsehood. In the absence of authentic materials for a biography of Shakspeare, conjecture has been busy, with a licentiousness of speculation which makes it necessary to take the stand of unbelief. It is, of course, not my intention to spend more of your time on this part of my subject, dismissing it as worthless: one or two specimens of this gossip will abundantly serve the purpose.

The absurd story of Shakspeare having earned a livelihood by holding horses at the theatre door was originally stated with an imposing array of the oral tradition on which it rested. Its claims to belief may be best judged of simply by quoting that authority. Sir William Davenant told it Mr. Betterton, who communicated it to Mr. Rowe; Mr. Rowe told it to Mr. Pope, and Mr. Pope told it to Dr. Newton, and Dr. Newton told it to a gentleman—probably Dr. Johnson—who told it to a man who, some two hundred years after the alleged event, put it in print

in a book, which, I may add, is remarkable for having no less than two falsehoods incorporated in the few capital words of its title-page. The tradition of Shakspeare's deer-stealing adventure and his consequent flight from a criminal prosecution has a little better claim to belief, but still with several improbabilities which make it safer to leave it to the receptacle of the fabulous.

All that is known with certainty of Shakspeare is known to every one. His birth, 25th of April, in the year 1564, at Stratford-upon-the-Avon; his youthful marriage; his removal to London, and theatrical career,—an actor, a manager, and a dramatic poet; his return to his native town a prosperous gentleman; his death in the year 1616, on the anniversary day of his birth, and on the selfsame day on which, in a remote region of Europe, the great master of Spanish fiction, Cervantes, breathed his last. In the church in which the child Shakspeare had, no doubt, been trained to worship, his body was buried, beneath an inscription strong with the powers of his pen and with an active energy to guard for centuries the sanctity of the grave; for, amid all the vapid enthusiasm of Stratford jubilees, and such senseless adoration as led one of his admirers to whitewash the antique bust upon his monument, if ever rash mortal dreamed of transferring the mouldering remains to a prouder mausoleum, there issued, as it were, from the very sepulchre a calm but appalling voice :—

“ Good friend, for Jesus' sake, forbear  
To dig the bones enclosed here.  
Blest be the man that spares these stones,  
And curst be he that moves my bones !”

In the village church let the honoured dust sleep till its eternal waking in quietness, the stream that sounded on his ear in childhood forever flowing near. While the genius of Shakspeare has gone, like the ashes of Wiclif's body, scattered first into the Avon, from Avon into Severn, from Severn into the narrow seas, then into the main ocean, and thus dispersed all the world over, the fit place for his perishable body is the grave that first received it; better than a stately sepulchre in the company of England's dead poets, beneath an abbey's roof. In the words of one who knew him in his bodily presence,—

“Under this curled marble of thine own,  
Sleep, rare tragedian! Shakspeare, sleep alone!”

I have thus purposely disposed in a very cursory manner of the facts of Shakspeare's life. But, while I would avoid the fruitless and illusive process of conjecture founded upon imperfect testimony,—the fitful flash of speculation,—I am not disposed to turn away from this portion of my subject without endeavouring to cast upon it the meek light of imagination. The first twenty-three years of Shakspeare's life—nearly half of his mortal existence, and a precious part of it—were spent in the place of his birth. A good deal of disquisition has been, it seems to me, somewhat vainly expended on the question of his learning, and a general impression has been the result that he was an uneducated prodigy; in support of which opinion is a well-known phrase of Ben Jonson's, attributing to his illustrious contemporary “*small Latin and less Greek.*” Ben Jonson was a scholar of profound classical erudition; and, if we were to take his standard and apply it to the educated community in general, I apprehend that



many of us, under his Latin and Greek measurement, might come out with a more diminutive result than that which has been perverted to sanction the opinion of Shakspeare's deficiency. From the respectable condition of his family, and still more from the easy and natural tone of even his early productions,—that tone of learning incorporated into the mind which it is so hard for an uneducated man to affect,—I have no doubt that Shakspeare's acquirements, so far from being below the standard of ordinary education, were such as to entitle him to rank among the well-educated, even though afterwards, in his intercourse with the literature of other languages,—the ancient and the foreign,—he had recourse to the secondary medium of translation. But how utterly insignificant does such an inquiry become when, turning from the matter of mere tuition, we strive after some conception, imperfect as it must be, of the self-formative process of Shakspeare's mind,—or, to express myself with more truth, the growth of his genius under the various ripening influences given for its development, not less than the implanting of its primal germ and elements! When, reasoning of Shakspeare as of other men, we seek for the ordinary causes which first suggest themselves, to account, for instance, for his power over the language, for his description of the visible outward world, and for that which distinguishes him above all other authors,—his knowledge of human nature, his familiarity with the visionary region of the heart,—how inadequate are such causes to explain the wondrous results! To say, indeed, that in early life he was a thoughtful and susceptible observer of all that could enter the avenues of sense, all earthly and all skyey influences,—that he meditated on the

hidden wealth of the English language,—that he was a student of the emotions and manners of his fellow-men,—and, more than all, that he held deep and unbroken communion with his own spirit,—would be to assert no more than reason warrants. But reason at the same time tells us that more yet is needed to solve the mystery of the Stratford boy. But it is in vain : nothing is equal to it ; there is a depth which neither empiricism, nor experiment, nor observation, nor theory, can fathom. Science is baffled, and all the elaborate statistics of education give no light. Where did Shakspeare gather the stores that he poured forth on an astonished world ? Was it at Stratford ? was it at London ? was it in school ?—in the throng of the market or the highway ? Was it in each or in all of these ? More, more is needed ; and, when an inquiry of this kind is instituted, we feel disposed to fall back to the simple belief of the fine image of Shakspeare's childhood in Gray's "Progress of Poesy :"—

"Far from the sun and summer gale,  
In thy green lap, was nature's darling laid,  
What time where lucid Avon strayed.  
To him the mighty mother did unveil  
Her awful face. The dauntless child  
Stretched forth his little arms and smiled."

If the growth of Shakspeare's transcendent powers defies all speculation, there is yet reason to believe that we may trace some influences which gave his genius a direction to the form of dramatic composition. That this is the species of authorship eminently congenial to him is manifest the least reflective on the unequalled facility with which he transfused himself, as it were, into the very character and life of his inventions. The town of

Stratford is known to have been visited, during the opening years of Shakspeare's manhood, by several sets of players in the service of different noblemen, especially the Earl of Leicester, whose name suggests the mention of a fact of some interest, from its probable connection with Shakspeare's boyhood. Between Kenilworth Castle, the residence of that nobleman, and the town of Stratford, the distance is that of but a few miles; and, when the noble residence was lighted with the sumptuous display of the princely festivities with which the visit of the Queen was welcomed by her unworthy and unprincipled favourite, Shakspeare was a youth, in the full flush of his twelfth year; and, amid the theories and conjectures to fill the blank of the unknown story of his life, I know of none more plausible than his presence on that animated occasion. It was a scene everyway calculated to enkindle the sparks of youthful enthusiasm and genius. There was the sovereign, (and it was an age when all took delight in the sentiment of personal loyalty to the monarch, —and that monarch was a woman,—without pausing to question the wisdom of that instinct of a dutiful and loving subject;) there were the nobles who accompanied her on those stately progresses with which, in various quarters of the realm, she won the affections of the people by an almost social intercourse. During the Queen's visit to Kenilworth there were songs and ballads, recitations of the old romances, the chaunting of the minstrelsy, and, more than all, the dramatic pageants elaborately prepared to crown the festivities. When we think of what was transpiring at Kenilworth, a little space away from the home of the boy Shakspeare, it might almost be said that we know that he was there. It

is to be regretted that, in the work of fiction in which the imagination of the most successful novelist of modern times has revived the long-buried splendour of Kenilworth, advantage was not taken of the probability I have alluded to, instead of the anachronism of referring to the achievements of Shakspeare's mature years. Scott's memory of his own childhood and youth was vivid; and I know of no finer theme for his imagination, strengthened by deep self-communion, than to have presented the youthful poet mingling with the throng at the castle of the Earl of Leicester,—a thoughtful boy, firing his genius by the light that blazed around the Virgin Queen.

The same year in which it is supposed Shakspeare left his native place for a residence in London was a period in the national history of England; for it was the time when stout English hearts and the tempestuous alliance of the elements had not only saved the soil from the pollution of a foreign invasion, but had driven the scattered fragments of the Armada, not back to the calm ports of Spain, but as far north as the stormy latitude of the Hebrides. There must have been then a high patriotic fervour kindling and filling each true and ample heart. I speak of these things because I cannot for a moment hesitate in believing that in this lofty emotion no heart more largely shared than the large heart that beat in the breast of William Shakspeare. I should not question its influence upon his genius, even if I did not see in his dramas signs enough of his intense nationality. He was too right-minded—too right-hearted in his genius—to be other than a lover of his own country and its men. There was in him no morbid and false-hearted dis-

loyalty to the soil that wrapped the bones of his fathers; no fantastic cosmopolitism or devotion to foreign climes; no such thing as dallying with Italian skies or making court to the snowy pinnacles of the Alps; but not the least manifestation of his genius was his profound and single-hearted love for England. The intrepid spirit that awaited the assault of Spain speaks in the lines in King John:—Falconbridge proclaiming,—

“This England never did, nor never shall,  
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Come the three corners of the world in arms,  
And we shall shock them.”

And in the whole range of prose and verse there is probably no passage which comes so near to the inspired patriotism of the Bible poetry—setting forth the glory and sublimity of Jerusalem—as the celebrated panegyric on England in Richard the Second, fitly spoken by the dying lips of “time-honoured Lancaster:”—

“This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise;  
This fortress, built by nature for herself,  
Against infection and the hand of war;  
This happy breed of men, this little world;  
This precious stone, set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands;  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.”

It might be expected that an intense nationality and loyalty to the government, as represented in the person

of the monarch, should, when these sentiments were as fervid as in the days of Queen Elizabeth, vividly affect the spirit of literature, and especially the dramatic literature, as placed in close contact with popular emotions. It may accordingly be observed not only in such passages as those just quoted; but the heart and the imagination of Shakspeare's most eminent contemporary, Ben Jonson, are full of the same devotion to England and to England's queen; as in his fine lines:—

“ May still this island be called fortunate,  
And rugged treason tremble at the sound  
When fame shall speak it with an emphasis;  
Let foreign polity be dull as lead,  
And pale invasion come with half a heart,  
When he but looks upon her blessed soil;  
The throat of war be stopped within her land,  
And turtle-footed peace dance fairy rings  
About her court, where never may there come  
Suspect or danger, but all trust and safety.”

I have deemed it one element, though a subordinate one, in the true appreciation of Shakspeare's genius,—the idea of the relation subsisting between it and the particular period of his country's history. But he was more than the representative of the mind of England at a certain time. He may be contemplated as the representative of the European mind,—the type of modern intellect as contrasted with the intellect of antiquity. In suggesting that Shakspeare is to be viewed not only in relation to England and to his times,—the actual half-century of his life passing from the sixteenth into the seventeenth century,—but in relation to the whole continent of Europe and to modern ages, I am indebted to

the philosophical thought of an accomplished English divine, who, in a recent series of eloquent discourses in the University of Cambridge, alluding to the peculiar habit of thought which has marked the three last centuries, and especially in Protestant countries, goes on to say:—

“It has often been observed that what peculiarly distinguishes the modern European mind is its predominant *subjectiveness* as contrasted with the greater *objectiveness* of former ages. This pervades all the forms of life, all the regions of thought. There has been a far deeper self-consciousness, which has often approached to a self-devouring disease; there has been a more minute self-analysis, a more piercing self-anatomy. Speculation has turned its eye inward,—has become more and more reflective. If we cast a look on the two main provinces of intellect in the great age which followed the Reformation, we find that in philosophy the grand achievement of that age was the purifying the method of investigation, the gaining a deeper insight into the laws of thought. . . . On the other hand, what distinguishes the great poet of the age subsequent to the Reformation is—as has been repeated a thousand times—his knowledge of human nature. That is to say, he is not contented, like earlier poets, to represent men as acting and suffering at critical seasons under the sway of passion: he leads us into their hearts and shows us the warfare raging there; not merely the calmness or the suffering of the surface,—the rolling and rushing of the waves: he plunges down into the depths, and enables us to discern what is bubbling up and boiling in the abyss. Herein, too, as he is the master, so is he the representative, of modern poetry, of which the general character has in like manner been reflective instead of instinctive”

There seems, to my mind, to be much of the comprehensive grasp of a true philosophy in this attempt to define the intellectual position of Bacon and of Shakspeare, as the representatives of modern European intellect in its two great departments,—science and poetry.

In a few years after Shakspeare's removal to London he published his earlier writings, which presented him as a poet before his appearance as a dramatic poet. These were the short poems of "Venus and Adonis" and "Lucrece." The character of these productions is not such as to make it necessary for me to pause upon them. Their intrinsic merit is no doubt considerable, but at the same time not sufficient to have given their author a fame at all proportionate to his more mature works. Their chief interest is probably derived from the reflected glory of his dramatic authorship; and there is, therefore, the less occasion to judge them independently than to consider whether they gave promise of the great achievements of his genius. It may be questioned whether any one—the most familiar with the spirit of the Shakspearian drama—could by internal evidence conjecture the authorship of the early poems. Unquestionably there may be discerned his exuberance of fancy, the imaginative energy, as manifested by the power of spreading any ruling feeling or passion so as to give its own colour to all that surrounds it, and of throwing himself into his creations. They are expressive of that untried period of genius when it has not yet acquired that composed consciousness which familiarity with its own action gives. The strong figure by which Coleridge criticized these poems was that in them "the creative power and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war-em-



brace." There is indeed, with all the luxuriance of imagery, the condensation of thought which always was one great element of his strength. But what strikes me more than aught else in these early productions is the manifestation of that imperial command over the language, which caused it to serve him as it never did other mortal speaking English words.

Not unfrequently the turn of fancy and of words recall, by a delicate parallelism, some more familiar passages in the dramas, as when Venus addresses Adonis:—

"Bid me discourse: I will enchant thine ear,  
Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green,  
Or, like a nymph with long dishevelled hair,  
Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen.  
Love is a spirit all compact of fire,  
Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire."

The imagery associates itself at once with the exquisite lines in Prospero's address to his fairy ministers:—

"Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves,  
And ye, that on the sands with printless foot  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
When he comes back."

These poems—the very firstlings of his heart (to appropriate to them one of his own phrases)—abound in that naturalness and simplicity of language for which Shakspeare's diction is eminent, and which, exempting it from limitation and obsolescence, appropriates it to all time. It is this quality which gives perpetuity to such a stanza as the following, on which it would be impossible to pronounce whether it was composed as early as the sixteenth century or as late as the nineteenth. It is descrip-

tive of Venus mourning over the lifeless body of Adonis :—

“She looks upon his lips, and they are pale !  
 She takes him by the hand, and that is cold !  
 She whispers in his ear a heavy tale ;  
 As if they heard the woeful words she told.  
 She lifts the coffer-lids that close his eyes,  
 When, lo ! two lamps, burnt out in, darkness lies.”

Or, where he expresses—as so constantly in the plays—a moral reflection, in an apostrophe to Opportunity :—

“The patient dies while the physician sleeps ;  
 The orphan pines while the oppressor feeds ;  
 Justice is feasting while the widow weeps ;  
 Advice is sporting while infection breeds :  
 Thou grant'st no time for charitable deeds.”

Of the poems of Shakspeare,—taking that word in a very narrow sense as contrasted with his plays,—the most remarkable are the sonnets. It is a most mysterious collection ; and the mystery which envelops it seems to be impenetrable to all the ingenuity of the commentators. It is likely to continue a vexed question whom they are addressed to. The address purports to be made to a male friend,—a certain “Mr. W. H.,” as he is enigmatically described on the title-page. It is surely no easy task to decipher two initials employed two hundred years ago, especially as there is such destitution of knowledge of the author's personal history. By some it has been conjectured that the person addressed was the Earl of Southampton, Shakspeare's early patron, to whom his first poems were dedicated ; by others, (the opinion most plausible,) William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. It is the suggestion of another commentator that “Mr. W. H.”

was a woman; and, by another, not only a woman, but that "Mr. W. H.," being interpreted, typified Queen Elizabeth. So that, amid this variety of vain conjectures, I do not see that any better conclusion can be reached than the opinion of one of the most intelligent of the Shakspearian commentators, deeply versed in the early English drama. "After all," is his remark, "what Lord Byron says of Junius is true concerning the object to whom Shakspeare's sonnets are principally addressed:"—

"I've an hypothesis,—tis quite my own:  
 'Tis that what Junius we are wont to call  
 Was really, truly, nobody at all!"

But the chief mystery in the sonnets is that they are conceived in a rapturous, amatory strain, not at all concordant with the sober, sedate tone of that rough sentiment, masculine friendship. Their poetical excellence is such as to make them not unworthy of their illustrious authorship. The deep thought, the rich imagery, and the majestic speech of Shakspeare are there. How exquisitely worthy of him who told of Macbeth's "way of life, fallen into the sere and yellow leaf," is such a sonnet as this!—

"That time of year thou mayest in me behold  
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
 Upon those boughs which stake against the cold  
 Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang  
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day  
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
 Which, by-and-by, black night doth take away,—  
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest!  
 In me thou seest the glowing of such fire  
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
 Consumed with that which it was nourished by!  
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong  
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long."

How true to the heart which uttered from its own comprehensive sympathy the devotion of the hapless lovers of Verona, and the superhuman affection of Desdemona, is the conception of love in these lines!—

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediments. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends, with the remover to remove.  
 Oh no! It is an ever-fixed mark,  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken.  
 It is the star to every wandering bark  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom!"

But the form of poetic composition to which the genius of Shakspeare's imagination of necessity directed itself was the drama; and such is his power of creation, of inventing, not a character, a mere type of any particular passion or trait, but the representative of human nature as it exists in individual reality, with the complexity and variety of elements which make up personal existence,—so wonderful was his might in endowing his creations with lifelike functions and qualities, that, even if tragedy and comedy had not been handed down from antiquity, I can conceive the possibility of Shakspeare's inventing the drama itself to supply the necessities of his imagination! The intrinsic demands of his own genius had far

greater influence in controlling his literary career than the mere incident of chance associations with theatrical life on his coming to London.

It is proper, at this point, to look at the condition of English dramatic literature at the time when Shakspeare, with many others, entered that intellectual arena. To trace the drama in England, from its origin to its great Shakspearian consummation, would be a theme far transcending my bounds; but, in a very summary way, I may glance at it. At an early and uncertain period theatrical representations had taken that curious form which prevailed throughout Europe in the Middle Ages,—the *Mysteries*, or *Miracle-plays*. These were scenical stories relating to religious subjects, taken either from Scripture history or the legends of the saints; so that there were theatrical representations of the Creation, of the massacre of the innocents and the sufferings of various martyrs. It is difficult to realize this phase of the European mind, when the most sacred subjects were thus appropriated without any accompanying sentiment of irreverence or profanity. Many of these dramas I could not venture to describe to you without exposing myself to the reproach of irreverent levity. Another form which the early drama assumed was that of the *Moralities*. These were allegorical dramas made up of abstract personifications, such as “Pride,” “Gluttony,” “Swift to Sin,” “Charity;” and what might be appropriate personifications in our day,—“Learning without Money,” and “Money without Learning,” and “All for Money.” They were the persons of the drama. In the great controversy of the Reformation these devices for edification were freely employed by both divisions of the church to promote their

respective opinions. An act of Parliament, in the reign of Henry VIII., for the promotion of true religion, forbade all interludes contradictory to established doctrines.

The "Mysteries" and "Moralities" gradually passed away; but it is not until so late a period as the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth that the beginning of the drama proper can be dated. One or two comedies belong to a somewhat earlier date; but the fame of the first English tragedy belongs to him whose single poetical effort in another department of poetry I had occasion to refer to in a former lecture with such high commendation,—Sackville, Lord Buckhurst.

But even within the last twenty years of the sixteenth century Sir Philip Sydney could find little on the English stage to save it from his disdainful censure. "It is strange," remarks Mr. Hallam, "to reflect that this reprehension comes from the pen of Sydney when Shakspeare had just arrived at manhood. Had he not been so prematurely cut off, what would have been the transport of that noble spirit, which the ballad of 'Chevy Chase' could stir as with the sound of a trumpet, in reading the 'Fairy Queen' or 'Othello'!"

Before the drama was touched by the wand of Shakspeare it had been much advanced by several dramatists, who, though contemporaneous, were his predecessors in authorship. The most eminent of these were Marlowe and Peele, and one to whom, as to his more illustrious coeval, Stratford had given birth,—Greene. The great dramatic era in English literature began in the middle of Elizabeth's reign; and, though in some measure checked by the puritan feeling which then began to manifest itself in England, it continued during that of her successor,

James I., when it reached its highest eminence, and flourished until the latter part of the turbulent reign which followed; when, in consequence of the tumults and calamities of the civil wars, the theatres were closed. The period designated is very little more than half a century,—from the middle of Elizabeth's to the end of Charles the First's reign,—and yet may be said to comprehend almost all the excellence of the English drama. I know of few things more remarkable in literary history than the vast abundance of dramatic literature during this comparatively brief era. A great amount of it has perished; a great amount is inaccessible in the rare original editions. The dramatists were numerous, their productions voluminous. One of them—Heywood—speaks of having had a share in the authorship of two hundred and twenty plays, of which only twenty-five, some of considerable merit, have been preserved. What was remarkable, too, these effusions flowed from their minds with a recklessness as to their preservation, a readiness to commit them to all the casualties of theatrical MSS., with an indifference as to their future destiny, contrasting curiously with that finical precision with which the little literary men of a later generation guard their small wares. I do not remember ever to have met any philosophical attempt to account for the amazing dramatic activity of the age of English literature under consideration. I should probably satisfy neither your minds nor my own were I to endeavour to trace it to that trait of those times,—the admirable blending of action and contemplation discoverable in many of the illustrious men who then flourished; for instance, Sir Philip Sydney devoting himself to the effort of raising English poetry

from the dust, kindling his heart with the strains of the old ballads, or driving the imagination of the gentle Spenser forth from the hermitage of his modesty, and at the same time sharing in affairs of state, in knightly deeds of arms, and meeting death upon the field of battle; or Raleigh, preserving the love of letters throughout his whole varied career at court, in camp, or tempest-tost in his adventures on the ocean. It seems to me that an age thus characterized by the combination of thought and deed in its representative men had its most congenial literature in that of the drama,—*poetry in action*.

As the most agreeable way of enumerating the most distinguished of the English dramatists, I may quote a passage from one of Thomas Heywood's plays, in which he complains, in jest and earnest, of the liberties taken with his fellow-authors:—

“Our modern poets to that pass are driven,  
 Those names are curtailed which they first had given;  
 And, as we wished to have their memories drowned,  
 We scarcely can afford them half their sound.  
*Greene*, who had in both academies ta'en  
 Degree of Master, yet could never gain  
 To be called more than *Robin*,—who, had he  
 Professed aught save the muse, served, and been free  
 After seven years' prenticeship, might have  
 (With credit, too) gone *Robert* to his grave;  
*Marlowe*, renowned for his rare art and wit,  
 Could ne'er attain beyond the name of *Kit*,  
 Although his *Hero* and *Leander* did  
 Merit addition rather; Famous *Kid*  
 Was called but *Tom*,—*Tom Watson*: though he wrote  
 Able to make *Apollo's* self to dote  
 Upon his muse, for all that he could strive,  
 Yet never could to his full name arrive;



*Tom Nash* (in his time of no small esteem)  
 Could not a second syllable redeem ;  
 Excellent *Beaumont*, in the foremost rank  
 Of the rarest wits, was never more than *Frank* ;  
 Mellifluous SHAKSPEARE, whose enchanting quill  
 Commanded mirth or passion, was but *Will* ;  
 And famous *Jonson*, tho' his learned pen  
 Be dipt in Castaly, is still but *Ben* ;  
*Fletcher* and *Webster*, of that learned pack  
 None of the meanest, neither was but *Jack* ;  
*Decker*, but *Tom* ; nor *May* nor *Middleton* ;  
 And he's now but *Jack Ford* that once were *John*.  
 Nor speak I this that any here exprest  
 Should think themselves less worthy than the rest  
 Whose names have their full syllables and sound ;  
 Or that *Frank*, *Kit*, or *Jack*, are the least wound  
 Unto their fame and merit. I, for my part,  
 (Think others what they please,) accept that heart  
 Which courts my love in most familiar phrase :  
 And that it takes not from my pains or praise  
 If any one to me so bluntly come ;  
 I hold he loves me best who calls me *Tom*."

Charles Lamb, to whose admirable "Specimens of the Early Dramatists" I am indebted for this passage, sensibly remarks that the familiarity of common discourse would be apt to take greater liberties with the dramatic poets, as being more upon a level with stage-actors ; and that the familiarity did not reach to the other poets, for we hear nothing of *Sam Daniel* or *Ned Spenser*.

I must confine these my cursory notices of the dramatists to the contemplation of Shakspeare's relative attitude in the midst of them. A living man, he mingled with them on the social terms of a friendly equality and intellectual independence. He was, "*the gentle Shakspeare*;" and all reason bids us to believe that his spirit knew not the stain of any mean envy or vulgar spite.

In the sight of later generations, equality with that dramatic legion, the host of his precursors, his contemporaries, and his successors, is not recognised. They were indeed poets too, with high imaginations, with high intellects, some with high learning; but he is seen standing amid the long range like Chimborazo overtopping the Andes. The learned editor of several of the early dramatists remarks, "A careful perusal of every existing drama of the reigns of Elizabeth and James has thoroughly convinced me of the immeasurable superiority of Shakspeare to all the playwrights of his time." I am not, I trust, insensible to the invention and power displayed by Fletcher, Jonson, Ford, Webster, Heywood, Middleton, and the rest of that illustrious brotherhood; but I feel that over the worst of Shakspeare's dramas his genius has diffused a peculiar charm, of which their best productions are entirely destitute; and to insinuate that any of his contemporaries ever produced a play worthy of being ranked with his happiest efforts—with "Othello," for instance, "Macbeth," "Lear," or "Hamlet,"—seems to me an absurdity unpardonable in any critic.

Again: that large-minded and open-hearted critic, Charles Lamb, announced as one design of his "Specimens of the Early Drama" to show how much of Shakspeare shines in the great men his contemporaries, and how far in his divine mind and manners he surpassed them and all mankind.

Accustomed as we are to such elevated conceptions of Shakspeare's powers, it makes a strange impression on the mind when we first read a description of the theatrical representations for which his writings were origi-

nally intended. The rude fashion of the buildings, and the still ruder fashion of the audience, seem singularly incongruous. "The amusements," we are told, "of the audience, previous to the commencement of the play, were reading, playing at cards, smoking tobacco, drinking ale, and eating nuts and apples. Even during the performance, it was customary for wits and critics, and young gallants who were desirous of attracting attention, to station themselves on the stage, either lying on the rushes or seated on hired stools, while their pages furnished them with pipes and tobacco." To these animals Shakspeare cast the pearls of his philosophy! To think that to such as these were first spoken the deep-souled melancholy, the heart-stricken meditations, of Hamlet! In one particular, it has been well remarked, the destitute condition of the early theatre was propitious to the poetry of the drama,—the absence of all movable scenery or scenic preparations rendering it necessary to appeal solely and strongly to the imagination of the hearer; for, had there been any ambitious imitation by painted canvass, we might not have stood with Lear on the cliffs of Dover, or amid the palaces of Venice with Shylock and Antonio.

The theatrical inadequacy in Shakspeare's own times suggests the inquiry whether the stage at any period is competent to the representation of his wonderful productions. Not questioning that occasionally a single part may be enacted with ability, I do not hesitate to believe that, for integrity of impression, the stage is utterly and universally incompetent; and, still more, that it intrudes into the imagination low, mean, and false associations,—notions which it is hard to purge the mind of.

\* For further particulars see "Shakspeare in England" by J. Thoinbary.

And therefore I rejoice that every year the representation of Shakspeare's plays is becoming less and less frequent. The satisfaction of witnessing the masterly representation of a chief part by a great actor is purchased at too high a cost.

How, for instance, can flesh and blood, of the lightest texture, deal with the representation of such a creature as Ariel, so ethereal that he speeds on Prospero's mandate,—

“I drink the air before me, and return  
Or e'er your pulse twice beat,”—

and, while doing his spiriting gently in his earthly master's service, can yet sing a bird-like song, a fairy's lyric, such as only Shakspeare's sweet fancy could have framed :—

“Where the bee sucks, there suck I;  
In a cowslip's bell I lie;  
There I couch when owls do cry;  
On the bat's back I do fly,  
After summer, merrily;  
Merrily, merrily shall I live now,  
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.”

What has the stage ever done for the weird sisters in “Macbeth”? The curtain rises, and there stand three figures, tattered and grotesque-looking,—very like those wretched vagrants to be seen in our streets picking rags and scraps from out the gutters; and the first sounds they utter reveal that the parts are filled by the comic actors of the company,—the very tones of whose voices come associated with vulgar buffoonery and ribaldry. And these are the chosen representations of those terrific creations! and thus that mighty work of genius, crimson-

dyed in the blood of tragedy, is ushered in, like a farce! No; the myriad mind of Shakspeare is a region too lofty and too pure for scenic art to reach. The genius of Garrick sank beneath the effort. The best acting plays are the works of far inferior dramatists; but for Shakspeare let no one put his intellect in pledge to receive his idea from the players. Indeed, several of his chief dramas have been vilely mutilated for the very purpose of adapting them to the stage. In "Richard the Third," passages have been interpolated which the heart of the poet would have repudiated with disgust. In the "Tempest" there was not love enough; and actually a second pair of lovers has been thrust in, marring the lovely impression of those sweet interviews of Ferdinand and Miranda. "Romeo and Juliet" was not tragic enough; and a little more grief is patched on the catastrophe. "King Lear" was too tragic, and the catastrophe must be abated.

The inadequacy of the stage—not only for Shakspeare's supernatural creations, but even his human characters—has been admirably discussed by Charles Lamb, in one of his peculiar and inimitable essays. "The Lear of Shakspeare," he remarks, "cannot be acted. It is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage: the contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm he goes out in is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements than any actor can be to represent Lear; they might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton upon a stage, or one of Michael Angelo's terrible figures. The greatness of Lear is not in corporeal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passions are terrible as a volcano;

they are storms, turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. This case of flesh and blood seems too insignificant to be thought on, even as he himself neglects it. On the stage we see nothing but corporeal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear; we are in his mind; we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms. . . . What have looks or tones to do with that sublime identification of his age with that of the *heavens themselves*, when, in his reproaches to them for conniving at the injustice of his children, he reminds them that 'they themselves are old'? What gesture shall we appropriate to this? what has the voice or the eye to do with such things? But the play is beyond all art, as the tamperings with it show. It is too hard and stony; it must have love-scenes and a happy ending. It is not enough that Cordelia is a daughter; she must shine as a lover too. . . . A happy ending!—As if the living martyrdom that Lear had gone through, the flaying of his feelings alive, did not make a fair dismissal from the stage of life the only decorous thing for him. If he is to live and be happy after,—if he could sustain this world's burden after,—why all this pudder and preparation? why torment us with all this unnecessary sympathy? As if the childish pleasure of getting his gilt robes and sceptre again could tempt him to act over again his mis-used station!—as if, at his years and with his experience, any thing was left but to die."

The knowledge of the drama of Shakspeare is to be gained by deep and careful study,—study thoughtful

and imaginative; that is, not only by reflection and meditation on the wisdom of his oracular poetry, but by sympathetic action of the imagination, so as to realize what he creates. Just in proportion to the intensity of this imaginative effort will be the completeness of conception formed of any of these inventions. Thus only do they leave an integrity of impression. For instance, it is essential to the true appreciation of "Macbeth" to realize the supernatural atmosphere which envelops the action of that tragedy with all its rapidity of movement. It is set in a shadowy, spectral region of witches and dreams and nightmare; of visions to the open eye of the wakeful and the sealed eye of the sleeping; of invisible and mysterious powers in the elements, and the prophetic sight of distant dynasties of kings; of incantations; of voiceless ghosts arising from bloody graves,—blood-bolstered visitants from charnel-houses; of the gloomy presentiments of the innocent and the more fearful hauntings of a blood-stained conscience. The brief scene the drama opens with stamps its whole character. It is a wild and instant appeal to the imagination, especially by the absence of all definite designation. The scene, "an open place:" amid thunder and lightning; the turmoil and carnage of war close at hand; the three witches, kinless, nameless,—sexless too, I may say; the weird women with beards, scenting the blood of a battle-field, meet, to meet again, to seal the deep damnation of their victim. Their fatal intent thus darkly intimated, they answer to mysterious calls of you know not what,—"Paddock" and "Graymalkin;"—and, ere you have well known their presence, they vanish,

with wild utterance of the confusion and murkiness of a demon's heart :—

“ Fair is foul, and foul is fair ;  
Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

In short space they come again,—these posters of the sea and land,—hastening from witchcraft mischief, gloating over the treasure of—

“ A pilot's thumb,  
Wrecked as homeward he did come.”

And then, catching somewhat of sublimity from the greatness of the malice, they rise suddenly to the full stature of their supernatural strength, and, on the blasted heath, proclaim their prophetic salutation to Macbeth and Banquo. The sun shines out a little while on that sweet landscape in which Duncan is moving on with sacrificial meekness to his slaughter. As the guilt deepens the supernatural atmosphere thickens with it,—visions and dreams and spiritual voices :—

“ Lamentings heard i' the air ; strange screams of death  
And prophesying, with accents terrible,  
Of dire combustion and confused events,  
New hatched to the woful time.”

There are Banquo's dreams of the weird sisters, and the bosom-weight of his gloomy presentiment ; the fatal vision of “ the air-drawn dagger,” with its “ goutts of blood ;” the broken sleep of the surfeited grooms, their laughter, their terror, and their prayers ; and the wild curse in the air of eternal wakefulness : and all this mag-



nified and distorted through the medium of a murderous, burning brain :—

“ There’s one did laugh in his sleep, and one cried, *murder!*  
That they did wake each other; I stood and heard them :  
But they did say their prayers, and addressed them  
Again to sleep.

\*       \*       \*       \*       \*       \*

“ One cried, *God bless us!* and, *Amen*, the other ;  
As they had seen me, with these hangman’s hands,  
Listening their fear ; I could not say, *Amen*,  
When they did say, *God bless us*.

\*       \*       \*       \*       \*       \*

“ Methought I heard a voice cry, *Sleep no more!*  
*Macbeth does murder sleep, the innocent sleep ;*  
*Sleep, that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,*  
*The death of each day’s life, sore labour’s bath,*  
*Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,*  
*Chief nourisher in life’s feast.*

\*       \*       \*       \*       \*       \*

“ Still it cried, *Sleep no more!* to all the house ;  
*Glamis hath murdered sleep ; and therefore Cawdor*  
*Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more !”*

The storm without is raging ; and who can doubt that the witches were riding on the blast and untying the winds on that unruly night? The whole domain of Macbeth’s castle is impregnated with the supernatural atmosphere :—the raven croaking over the battlements, the owl screaming, the obscene bird clamouring the livelong night,—

“ Duncan’s horses, . . . .  
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,  
Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,  
Contending ’gainst obedience, as they would make  
War with mankind.”

At a more advanced part of the tragedy the supernatural begins to fade away; "the dark and midnight hags"—whom the tyrant tampers with while their toils are winding closer and closer round him—vanish with Macbeth's curse upon them :—

"Infected by the air whereon they ride,  
And damn'd all those that trust them."

And when we draw near the catastrophe of the drama we almost forget the witchery of the weird sisters. Their mighty and superhuman malice has been achieved, and then all is left to human vice, human passion, human misery. The high-wrought spirituality of the tragedy has its sublime close in the slumbering agitation of Lady Macbeth,—that terrific, open-eyed, sleep-walking, sleep-talking,—and the never-ending misery of the blood-stained hand,—the appalling incoherencies of the hauntings of guilt :—

"Out, damned spot! out, I say! . . . . Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? . . . . I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out of his grave. . . . Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand."

At the last the supernatural has passed wholly away; the witches, the ghosts, the incantations, and the dreams,—all are gone; and Macbeth, forsaken by the suicide of his fiend-like queen, is left alone,—the sea of blood sweeping him onward, helpless, hopeless; for its red tide has washed out, one by one, the promises that witchcraft had written upon sand, and, with wild misgivings

of all realities, he stands, "a-weary of the sun," upon a desert spot of this bank and shoal of time;—behind him the furies of a murderous memory, before him the blackness of an accursed darkness, and, in its centre, Death.

Taking the thought from this tragedy, the remark may be generalized on the whole Shakspearian drama, that all the sympathies it gives are with goodness, all its hatred of vice. Disfigured though it be in spots by the grossness of his times, or, still more, of theatrical interpolations, it is ministrant in the cause of virtue; and the commentator on Shakspeare has no more important office than to illustrate the sanity of his genius,—his intellectual and moral healthfulness. The large sympathy he communicates is comprehensive not only of afflicted virtue, but also when human frailty has brought down calamities on its own head. The tragedies abound with this forgiving temper, this Christian spirit of pity, this teaching of brotherly kindness and fervent charity, not trampling on a fellow-being, rejoicing in his sorrows because he deserved them, but restoring him in the spirit of meekness. What, for instance, at the outset, is Lear, but a weak, petulant, doting, headstrong, selfish, foolish old man? But how are we not taught to forget and forgive all this when his woes throng round him! His intellectual power rising with his misery, and his sublime madness giving him unwonted dignity, we have at last but one feeling for the child-changed father.

Observe, too, this trait in the historical drama of "Richard the Second." You look on him at first as at once arbitrary and imbecile,—heartless, vain, and violent; but, when affliction comes, his sense of royalty rises in

as majestic a strain as ever proclaimed the divine right of kings:—

“When the searching eye of heaven is hid  
 Behind the globe, and lights the lower world,  
 Then thieves and robbers range abroad unseen,  
 In murders, and in outrage, bloody here;  
 But when, from under this terrestrial ball,  
 He fires the proud tops of the eastern pines,  
 And darts his light through every guilty hole,—  
 Then murders, treasons, and detested sins,  
 The cloak of night being plucked from off their backs,  
 Stand bare and naked, trembling at themselves.  
 So when this thief, this traitor, Bolingbroke,—  
 Who all the while hath revelled in the night,  
 Whilst we were wandering with the antipodes,—  
 Shall see us rising in our throne the east,  
 His treasons will sit blushing in his face,  
 Not able to endure the sight of day,  
 But, self-affrighted, tremble at his sin.  
*Not all the water in the rough rude sea*  
*Can wash the balm from an anointed king:*  
 The breath of worldly men cannot depose  
 The deputy elected by the Lord;  
 For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed  
 To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,  
 God for his Richard hath in heavenly pay  
 A glorious angel: then, if angels fight,  
 Weak men must fall; for heaven still guards the right.”

And how exquisitely is our sympathy conciliated by the description of Richard's majesty waning in the presence of the rising popularity of Bolingbroke!—

“Men's eyes  
 Did scowl on Richard; no man cried, God save him!  
 No joyful tongue gave him his welcome home;  
 But dust was thrown upon his sacred head;

Which with such gentle sorrow he shook off,—  
His face still combating with tears and smiles,  
The badges of his grief and patience,—  
That, had not God, for some strong purpose, steeled  
The hearts of men, they must perforce have melted,  
And barbarism itself have pitied him."

I trust that no one has been so uncharitable as to impute to me the absurdity of fancying that one lecture could embrace more than a very inadequate proportion of what is due to the vast theme. I dare not trust myself even to name the various unnoticed considerations respecting the genius of Shakspeare, for they rise up to my mind in throngs. When I was obliged to close my incomplete examination of Spenser's "Fairy Queen," I presumed distantly to intimate the hope that some future occasion might give me ampler space for our converse with that wondrous allegory. May I venture now to add the expression of a feeling—of course, merely my own—that, so far as I am concerned, I can promise myself no better pleasure than, at some future time, with the light of the same kind and intelligent faces upon me, to enter upon the studious and reverential consideration of the whole series of the dramas of Shakspeare?

In conclusion: a few words of Shakspeare himself. It is said that the last of his poems was the "Tempest;" and certainly the close is finely typical of the close of his career of authorship. The most touching of the series of his sonnets are the confessional ones, in which he mourns over the contamination of his pure and gentle spirit by the uncongenial courses of a player's trade:—

"Alas! 'tis true I have gone here and there,  
And made myself a motley to the view,

Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,  
Made old offences of affections new.

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Oh, for my sake do you with fortune chide,  
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,  
That did not better for my life provide,  
Than public means, which public manners breeds.  
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand ;  
And almost thence my nature is subdued  
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand."

When, in the maturity of his powers, Shakspeare turned away from London and sought the sweet places of his innocent childhood, we can almost hear him, in the words of Prospero, abjuring his magic, dismissing the spiritual creations of his imagination, and looking to the tranquil village he was born in, where

"Every third thought shall be my grave."

The highest glory of Shakspeare's poetry is its spirituality. With all its quick sympathies with things of sight, it is full of the life by faith. Kindred at once to earth and heaven, it realizes what Wordsworth, with a noble image, grandly tells :—

"Truth shows a glorious face  
While, on that isthmus which commands  
The councils of both worlds, she stands."

There is many a trace to show how deep was Shakspeare's sense of the perishable nature of the things of time. How deeper still was his sense of eternity and its glories ! Reflect on that fine passage in "Antony and Cleopatra," when the Roman feels that his own fortunes and ancient Egypt's power are lost forever :—

“Sometime we see a cloud that’s dragonish;  
 A vapour, sometime, like a bear, or lion,  
 A towered citadel, a pendant rock,  
 A forkéd mountain, or blue promontory  
 With trees upon’t, that nod unto the world  
 And mock our eyes with air; thou hast seen these signs;  
 They are black vesper’s pageants.”

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“That which is now a horse, even with a thought  
 The rack displinns, and makes it indistinct,  
 As water is in water.”

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“Eros, now thy captain is  
 Even such a body: here I am Antony;  
 Yet cannot hold this visible shape.”

Now, with this compare the hopeful, faithful spirit in a passage which has been considered, perhaps, the most sublime in Shakspeare:—

“Look how the floor of heaven  
 Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold;  
 There’s not the smallest orb, which thou behold’st,  
 But in his motion like an angel sings,  
 Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims:  
 Such harmony is in immortal souls;  
 But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.”

It is worthy of reflection that wherever a holy subject is touched by Shakspeare it is with a deep sentiment of unaffected reverence. The parting thought I have of his genius is that not vainly were spent in the comparative loneliness of the Avon village those last silent years of him who could place on the tongue of his saintly Isabella

such fit and feeling words on the most sacred of all sacred themes :—

“ Alas !—alas !

Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once,  
And He that might the vantage best have took  
Found out the remedy. How would you be  
If he, which is the top of judgment, should  
But judge you as you are? Oh, think on that;  
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,  
Like man new made.”



## LECTURE VI.

### Milton.

Abundance of biographical materials — Dr. Johnson's life — Milton among the great prose writers — Milton's conception of his calling as a poet — Poetry the highest aim of human intellect — Milton's youthful genius — Study of Hebrew poetry — Latin poem to his father — The rural home — Poetic genius improved by study — Visits to the London Theatres — Thoughtful culture of his powers — Allegro and Penseroso — Lycidas — Dr. Johnson's judgments on this poem — Masque of Comus — Faith and Hope and Chastity — The Hymn on the Nativity — Power and Melody of the Miltonic versification — Visit to Galileo — Milton in Rome — Story of Tasso's life — Influence over Milton — The Rebellion — The condition of the English monarchy — The poet's domestic troubles — Sonnets — Johnson's criticisms on them — Milton's Latin despatches — Sonnet on the Piedmont persecution — Coleridge and Wordsworth on the moral sublimity of the poet's life — The *Paradise Lost* — The character of Satan — Coleridge's criticism — The grandeur of the epic — The *Paradise Regained* — The *Samson Agonistes* — Poetry a relief to the poet's overcharged heart.

THE birth of Milton, in the year 1608, dates about eight years before the death of Shakspeare, thus preserving the tie of time between the three most glorious of England's poets, — Edmund Spenser, William Shakspeare, and John Milton. In the last lecture I had occasion to remark on the well-known dearth of personal information respecting our great dramatic poet. As to our great epic poet, the contrast in this particular is as strik-

ing as possible. Of Shakspeare we know almost nothing; of Milton we know almost every thing. The entire collection of his poems, the equally complete collection of his prose works, his official writings, his private correspondence, the incidental mention by his contemporaries, his autobiographical notices,—all are preserved. Stimulated by this abundance of biographical materials, and also by the consideration that Milton's character was illustrative of great principles in various departments of human thought, an unparalleled number of biographers—from his own nephew down to not a few authors within the last few years—have made his memoir their chosen theme. More biographies have been written of him than, perhaps, of any man who ever lived. I have had the curiosity to enumerate them, and could mention no fewer than twenty-five. Of all these, unhappily, the one most read is the one most uncongenial and, in many points, injurious,—that by Dr. Johnson. With every variety of opinion—poetical, political, moral, and theological,—are these biographies tinctured. They have issued from the pens of poets, of antiquaries, of divines, of scholars, of painters, from Churchmen and Dissenters, from infidels, from the high-toned aristocrat, the Whig, and the Chartist.

Milton is a vast and varied theme. He may be viewed in his chief glory as a *poet*. Again, so eventful was his life, that a worthy subject of study is his character as a man. And if, in the endeavour to promote the cause of English literature, I should ever be led to enter upon the series of great prose writers in our language, high among them, along with Bacon and Clarendon, Hooker and Jeremy Taylor and Burke, as among the poets, would be

found the name of Milton. Closely as these three representations of the character of Milton are connected,—each giving its illustration to the other,—the subject to which our thoughts are now to be directed is the genius of his poetry.

Important as were many of the other labours of Milton's, it can be shown that at no period—in the buoyancy of youth, in the bitterness of controversy, in the toil of state services, whether vindicating his private good name or standing forth to defend the English people, in favour, or in poverty and persecution—did he forget that the great business of his existence was to give utterance to the promptings of imagination. Poetry was his imperial theme,—the controlling and harmonizing idea of his life; and the aspirations of his inmost nature may be traced throughout all his writings, no matter how unpromising their topic. The art enters into his scheme of education, “not as,” he protests, “the prosody of a verse among the rudiments of grammar, but that sublime art which would soon show what despicable creatures our common rhymers and play-writers be; and what religious—what glorious and magnificent—use might be made of poetry, both in divine and human things.” It is impressive to hear the boy Milton, in his early verses, pleading with his father that poetry is a holy thing; and, again, to hear him in the prime of manhood, amid the stern words of one of his controversial publications, announcing that “the great achievements of poetry must rest on devout prayer to that Eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases.” So sublime was

Milton's conception of his chief calling, that no occasion of public moment is suffered to transcend it in his thoughts. When he addresses the Parliament,—that noted Parliament composed of such stern stuff as filled the breasts of Cromwell and Pym and Hollis and Haslerig,—he is true to the laureate fraternity, and cites as authority to that tribunal the imaginative lore of “our sage and serious poet Spenser.” And when, nearly thirty years before its consummation, the idea of his “adventurous song” broke the bonds of silence, in anticipation that, at some distant day, “he might take up the harp and sing an elaborate song to generations,”—and when he spoke of being led by the genial power of nature to another task than his polemics, and of the inward promptings that, by labour and intense study, joined with the strong propensity of nature, he might, perhaps, leave something so written to after-times as “they should not willingly let die,”—all, not less than his immortal epic, show his deep belief that the highest aim of human intellect is poetry;—that the things “of highest hope and hardest attempting proposed by the mind in the spacious circuit of her musings” are to be wrought out by the imagination.

So far back as we are able to penetrate into Milton's early life, there may be discovered in his very boyhood traces of a consciousness that he was endowed with an imagination for which mighty works were in prospect;—an endowment recognised as a trust committed to him by his Creator, and therefore to be cherished sedulously, and held sacred from the pressure of outward circumstances changing the direction of his intellectual destiny. His whole existence was a preparation for the stupendous

achievement of the "Paradise Lost." There was no precipitancy,—no rash forwardness of a youthful, misjudging ambition; but a reserve and dignity, in which the voice of his genius seemed to be whispering that his hour was not yet come. In studying this subject, I have been deeply impressed with a sense of the magnanimity to be traced in Milton's childhood,—the largeness of soul belonging to the little boy. And how does this appear? In various passages of his prose writings, as well as of his poetry, he has told the history of his mind almost as far back as his memory could travel, disclosing how the foundations of his genius were laid; and it is clear that, in those early years, the heaven-inspired endowment of a poet's spirit was there, with all the cravings of an imagination outstripping its own creative powers. There was in Milton's young bosom a poet's heart, with aspirations after ideal grandeur and goodness and beauty, transcending its early strength, and therefore seeking its nourishment, not in crude and forced fruits of his own imagination, but in the majestic growth of the high poetry of all ages. The proof of the might of Milton's youthful genius was his silence;—the high-minded reserve of one who, keeping the hope of achievement in a distant day, knew that it ill became him to thrust forward the rash and unformed ambitions of boyhood. The vast idea of the functions of poetry which early took possession of him forbade the thought that any thing he could then produce could even approach the standard of his own conception. He felt that he must await his time, and was far too strong-minded to spend his efforts in juvenile effusions, and then to hang over them with the weak and self-enamoured delusion of an author's vanity. The glory of Milton's

youth is not precocious poetry, but the self-sacrificing devotion of a student. Before the twelfth year of his life, the child's tender eyesight had received, from intense and midnight study, the first fatal injury which brought in its train the dark calamity of hopeless blindness. There is no period of Milton's long career more finely characteristic of his genius than when, in youth and early manhood, he may be imagined seated in silence at the feet of the great masters of song who had gone before him. It was their voices alone, and not the tender notes of his own, that could fill the large spaces of his heart. The noblest sounds of all poetry—whether of a remote antiquity or of a nearer day and of his own land—were perpetually sweeping over his spirit, not mingling with any utterance of his young imagination, but passing on into futurity on the wings of hope, to meet strains of equal glory, that were yet, in the far distance, to rise up in the poetry of the "Paradise Lost." It was in the sacred stream of Hebrew poetry that the youthful genius of Milton was baptized: it was the divine imagery of the Psalmist, the prophets, and of him who saw the Apocalypse, which deep-dyed the colour of his imagination. Nor did his mind, in the amazing activity of his youth, stop there, but, winging its flight over profane as well as sacred soil, held communion with all the remnant glory of classical poetry; and then, after having thus travelled into the ancient inspirations of Palestine, of Greece, and Rome, it dwelt, too, in spirit with the poets of modern Italy, and still more fervently with the great ones of his own England. The poetry of every age and of every land was breathing upon his soul, feeding and fanning the inward fire that was deeply burning there.

Of Milton's juvenile poems—which are composed mostly in Latin—the one which, perhaps, has chief interest, is that addressed to his father; not so much because of any extraordinary poetic merit, as for its thoughtful strain of filial gratitude. Parental care over the course of a child's intellect was never more feelingly, more honourably acknowledged. Some few misgivings appear to have crossed the mind of Milton's father, that the bent of his genius might divert him from the useful pursuits of active life; but the uncalculating enthusiasm of the youth's larger spirit was solicitous, not so much to plead with his parent against such opinions, as to vindicate him from them,—to persuade him that such thoughts did not in truth belong to one who had so congenially cherished his child's imaginative studies. Cowper's translation of the poem may furnish one brief passage :—

“No! howsoe'er the semblance thou assume  
Of hate, thou hatest not the gentle Muse,  
My father! for thou never bad'st me tread  
The beaten path and broad that leads right on  
To opulence, nor didst condemn thy son  
To the insipid clamours of the bar,—  
To laws voluminous and ill-observed,—  
But, wishing to enrich me more, to fill  
My mind with treasure, led'st me far away  
From city din to deep retreats,—to banks  
And streams Aonian,—and with free consent  
Didst place me happy at Apollo's side.”

After Milton's childhood in London and his collegiate career of several years, in the discipline of which there appears to have been something at variance with his temperament, he came back in the prime of manhood

to the home of his father's house. That home was now transferred from the thronged thoroughfares of the metropolis to the tranquil repose of a country residence. The seven cloistered years in the calm retreats of one of the ancient British universities were followed by five equally studious and happier years spent beneath his father's rural roof at Horton. This was probably the happiest period of his life; and when, in anticipation, I reflect how, at an advanced stage of his existence, his imagination gathered the vast accumulations of his erudition and made them all subservient to the purposes of poetry, I cannot but consider these rural years as among the most influential on his genius. There was shining upon him the light of the happy faces of both parents,—a father whose strong passion for music was inherited by the poet, a mother full of that goodness which, like the charitable deeds of the pious George Herbert, gave thoughts which proved music at midnight. The bright vision of an English landscape was ever before him; and still, year after year, was his mind travelling farther and farther into the limitless regions of poetic invention, imbuing his imagination with the spirit of all that was beautiful and sublime in Hebrew song and in classical and chivalrous poetry.

Amid all his acquirements, the one volume forever foremost and uppermost in his thoughts was the Bible. In what I may call uninspired inspiration, his favourites were Homer and Pindar; and perhaps more than either was the drama of Euripides, "sad Electra's poet," and Dante, Petrarch, and Tasso, and the three illustrious predecessors in his own language, with whom he was soon to take rank,—Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakspeare. His



studies roamed, too, through the shady spaces of Philosophy, catching from the divine volumes of the best of the Athenian schools that platonic spirit which may be traced in much of the early English poetry, and stored his memory with all that history recorded, and not less with the lofty fables and romances which recount the deeds of knighthood. It was to those five tranquil happy years at Horton, beneath the unanxious shelter which the paternal roof alone can give, that the vast opulence of Milton's intellect was chiefly owing,—the rich amalgamation of poetry sacred and profane, of theology, philosophy, history, fable, of science, in the severe and exact knowledge of abstractions, and in the fit harmonies of music. The important moral to be drawn from this part of Milton's life is, not that education can ever originate the natural endowment of a poet's genius, but how that gift of imagination, by study and meditative communion outward and inward, may be strengthened, enriched, and expanded, and how false is the notion that, when a poet speaks, he speaks as it were from some lawless, thoughtless, ungovernable frenzy.

The intensity of Milton's studies at his rural retreat appears to have been relieved by occasional visits to the metropolis, where he refreshed his spent spirits by witnessing the theatrical representations of the English drama, then so copiously supplied by the fresh and abundant growth in the times of Queen Elizabeth's and the first of the Stuarts' reigns. For two of the great English dramatic poets Milton's admiration is recorded in a well-known passage in one of his shorter poems, referring to Jonson's learned sock and the "native wood-notes wild" of Shakspeare. His visits to London and its theatres are mentioned in one

of his Latin poems, in a few lines. I may quote to you from Cowper's English version, with the remark that it will be no forced fancy to apply the allusions at the close to the tragic fate of Romeo, and to Banquo's appalling presence in the banquet-scene in Macbeth :—

“If impassioned Tragedy wield high  
The bloody sceptre, give her locks to fly  
Wild as the winds, and roll her haggard eye,  
I gaze, and grieve, still cherishing my grief.  
At times even bitter tears yield sweet relief;  
As when, from bliss untasted torn away,  
Some youth dies, hapless, on his bridal day;  
Or when the ghost, sent back from shades below,  
Fills the assassin's heart with vengeful woe.”

During the period of the history of Milton's genius when dwelling at Horton, its silent unseen roots were sinking deeper and spreading wider, to draw nourishment from the richest soil of ancient and modern literature. The mighty growth so stoutly rooted was at last beginning to utter sounds from its waving branches and from the light leaves of its topmost boughs; the life which had been coursing invisibly in its channels burst forth in surpassing luxuriance of blossom and of flower. While Milton had practised such admirable reserve in early authorship, because he had “not completed to his mind the full circle of his private studies,” still, he tells us himself—that he felt, “by every instinct and presage of nature, which is not wont to be false, that what had emboldened other poets to their achievements might with the same diligence as they used embolden him.” With all the early silence of his muse, his spirit was sustained in its high hopes by what he calls “his honest haughtiness

and self-esteem of what he was or what he might be." The whole life of Milton was a life of principle, and not of impulse, or, rather, of principle controlling impulse. He was silent from a strong sense of duty,—the pious conviction that the talent committed to him was to be neither rashly squandered nor basely hid. The remonstrances of an affectionate friend caused, on one occasion, some misgivings as to the tardy movings of his genius,—“a certain belatedness,” as he called it,—a self-suspicion that he was suffering himself to dream away his years “in studious retirement, like Endymion with the moon;” but these misgivings and apprehensions vanished away with the reflection—the precept of his conscience—that the great power which God had intrusted to him—a poet’s creative imagination—was to be kept with a sacred reverence and religious advisement. It is in this thoughtful sense of responsibility that one of the earliest of his severely meditative sonnets is conceived:—

“How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,  
 Stolen on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!  
 My hasting days fly on with full career,  
 But my late spring no bud or blossom showeth.  
 Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth  
 That I to manhood am arrived so near,  
 And inward ripeness doth much less appear,  
 That some more timely-happy spirits endueth.  
 Yet, be it less or more, or soon or slow,  
 It shall be still in strictest measure, even  
 To that same lot, however mean or high,  
 Toward which Time leads me and the will of Heaven;  
 All is, if I have grace to use it so,  
 As ever in my great Taskmaster’s eye.”

The fruits of what I may call the rural period of

Milton's life, were those two descriptive lyrics, "L'Allegro" and "Penseroso," which are, perhaps, better known than the rest of his short poems, and which I shall not pause on longer than to say that their charm consists in a great measure in their true picturing of actual landscape, dappled at the same time with the sunshine of a poet's fancy,—presenting, by the harmonizing light of imagination, the ploughman in the furrowed field, the blithely-singing milkmaid, the mower whetting his scythe, the shepherd seated under the hawthorn, and such familiar rural objects, together with creatures of the fancy,—the cherub Contemplation soaring on golden wing, the mountain-nymphs and the wood-nymphs in their hallowed haunts, and all

"Such sights as youthful poets dream  
On summer eves by haunted stream."

Another poem of the same period is the monody "Lycidas," composed, it will be remembered, on the death by shipwreck of one of the poet's dearest friends, and on which was pronounced one of the most extraordinary of all the perverse, unimaginative, wrong-hearted and wrong-minded critical judgments which Dr. Johnson apparently delighted in when dealing with Milton's poetry. It would consume more space than I can command to scrutinize that criticism; and, therefore, I must refrain from characterizing it as I think of it, because I might seem to express myself more strongly than I could make good against such authority. It is a poem which has not only won the hearty admiration of many a thoughtful, imaginative reader of poetry, but it has even been considered by more than one trustworthy critic (among them Hallam)

as a good test of a real feeling for what is peculiarly called poetry. Yet Johnson had the hardihood to say of it,—after condemning its diction as harsh, its rhymes as uncertain, the numbers unpleasing, and its want of feeling,—“In ‘Lycidas’ there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting, with a yet grosser fault,—its approach to impiety by the indecent mingling of trifling fictions with the most awful and sacred truths.” Who could have dreamed that so bitter a rebuke was levelled at the sublime passage in which, after sundry mythological personages, by an effort of imagination appealing to the sympathetic activity of the reader’s imagination, the august form of St. Peter is introduced?—

“Last came, and last did go,  
The pilot of the Galilean lake:  
Two massy keys he bore, of metals twain;  
(The golden opes, the iron shuts amain.)  
He shook his mitred locks, and stern bespake.”

It would not, I think, be without interest to examine minutely Dr. Johnson’s judgments upon this poem, and to trace them to a prejudiced and blind misapprehension of the higher aims of imagination,—a dogmatic obtuseness to the most magical spells of poetry. But too many of the poet’s great works remain before me; and I can say no more on this point than that any one who desires to take home to his heart and to his intellect a just sense of the spirit of Milton’s poetry must look at it with other vision than the bleared eyes of that eminent writer who compiled the “English Dictionary.”

The prime of Milton's manhood produced also the exquisite masque of "Comus." This form of dramatic composition, originally introduced from Italy, was long a favourite in England, and, being less restrained than the regular drama by rules, gave wider scope to poetical fancy. The severity of Milton's well-disciplined judgment was well fitted to check its tendency to fantastic extravagance; and there is probably no poem in the language better calculated to delight readers of almost all moods of poetic taste. It combines, in a very remarkable degree, a vivid energy of imagination, and an exuberance of all that is fanciful and beautiful in imagery and language, with a majesty of meditative philosophy diademed with the radiant glory of poetry. "Comus" presents not a few beautifully-reflected lights of Milton's poetic studies. You may discover, at times, echoes, as it were, of the sweet modulations of Shakspeare's sentences,—combinations of words we are half tempted to appropriate to some of his dramas; and, again, traces of the matchless spirituality of Spenser. In the lines,—

"Virtue could see to do what Virtue would  
By her own radiant light, though sun and moon  
Were in the flat sea sunk; and Wisdom's self  
Oft seeks to sweet retired solitude;  
Where, with her best nurse, Contemplation,  
She plumes her feathers and lets grow her wings,  
That, in the various bustle of resort,  
Were all too ruffled, and sometimes impaired.  
He that has light within his own clear breast  
May sit in the centre, and enjoy bright day,"—

We are here reminded of the Red-Cross Knight in the "Fairy Queen,"—his glittering armour making a little

gleaming light in the den of Error, or of that image of surpassing beauty, surpassing Una's angel-face shining bright and making a sunshine in the shady place. One of the most beautiful passages in the poem of "Comus"—beautiful for the imaginative blending of spiritual and bodily emotions—is that in which the lady, wandering in the darkness of the forest and in the darkness of her own benighted loneliness, beholds, in spirit, gleams from her unembodied guardians, Faith and Hope and Chastity, hovering round her footsteps, and at the same time, with her *bodily* sight, the dark cloud which had dimmed the sky brightening with sudden moonlight:—

"A thousand fantasies

Begin to throng into my memory,  
Of calling shapes, and beckoning shadows dire,  
And aery tongues that syllable men's names  
On sands and shores and desert wildernesses.  
These thoughts may startle well, but not astound  
The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended  
By a strong-siding champion, Conscience.  
Oh, welcome, pure-eyed Faith! white-handed Hope,  
Thou hovering angel, girt with golden wings!  
And thou, unblemished form of Chastity!  
I see ye visibly, and now believe  
That He, the Supreme Good, to whom all things ill  
Are but as slavish officers of vengeance,  
Would send a glistering guardian, if need were,  
To keep my life and honour unassailed.  
Was I deceived? or did a sable cloud  
Turn forth her silver lining on the night?  
I did not err: there does a sable cloud  
Turn forth her silver lining on the night,  
And casts a gleam over this tufted grove."

The virtue of that passage should so have its home in every heart that the recollection of it may rise up and

make the brightness of any dark but moon-touched cloud brighter to the eye, and brighter still to the imagination, as it floats along the sky, the image of that light which beams from heaven upon the heart of innocence.

Much that is prophetic of the great poem of his later years may be seen in the spiritual invention of this early poem,—the vision of bad and good angels, Comus and his brutish rabble, and the attendant spirit described in the opening lines,—one of

“Those immortal shapes  
Of bright aerial spirits . . . insphered  
In regions mild of calm and serene air,  
Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot  
Which men call earth.”

I ought not to quit this exquisite poem without remarking how perfectly it illustrates the magic power of poetry to shed a glory on things which are lying in life's daily prospect. Here is a poem of a thousand lines, radiant with fancy, full of spirits of the air, and fairy spells, and the meditations of an imaginative philosophy. And what was the occasion of it? A simple accident in the family of the Earl of Bridgewater when keeping his court at Ludlow Castle. His daughter, the Lady Alice Egerton, and her two brothers, were benighted and lost their way in Haywood Forest; and the brothers, in attempting to explore their path, left their sister alone in a tract of country inhabited by a boorish peasantry. When the fair one's heart was throbbing in the lonely wood, how little could she have dreamed that a poet's words were to win for her brighter and more enduring honour than aught that wealth or heraldry could give!



But the most distinct foreshadowing of the immortal epic poem is given in a poem shorter and earlier than "Comus,"—the "Hymn on the Nativity." It has very much the sound of "Paradise Lost" set to a lyrical measure. When listening to the line closing one of the stanzas,—

"The wakeful trump of doom must thunder through the deep,"—

I fancy I can hear it in the "Paradise Lost," composed some forty years after, reverberating after that lapse of years in a passage which is the very echo of it:—

"The thunder,  
Winged with red lightning and impetuous rage,  
Perhaps has spent his shafts, and ceases now  
To bellow through the vast and boundless deep."

The tranquil hours at Horton were drawing to a close. The happy household was broken by the death of the poet's mother. It is a trait of tenderness in the character of one whose character we are too apt to regard as all severity, that it was not until, to borrow the words of the Psalmist, "he went heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother," that the wish for foreign travel was indulged by Milton. Having, by the poems already mentioned, acquired reputation as a poet, in his thirtieth year he left England to travel to lands whose ancient glory was still hanging over the south of Europe. It would be interesting to follow him in imagination as he roamed through classic lands, a young enthusiast in the full flush of fresh poetic genius, the strength of admirable scholarship, and in the prime of manly beauty, with not a

wrinkle by the cares which after a few years seamed his brows,—to stand with him in the presence of Grotius, then an ambassador to the Court of France,—and, with still deeper interest, to accompany him at Florence, visiting Galileo old, a prisoner of the Inquisition and fast sinking under his burdens into the grave. How must the young poet's heart, full as it ever was to overflowing with the passion for freedom,—the single-spirited love of intellectual freedom and truth,—have throbbed in the visible presence of the victim of spiritual despotism! The moral dignity of this sad spectacle sank deep into Milton's imagination, to rise up again at another distant day to furnish a fit allusion in the description of the broad circumference of Satan's shield,—

“Like the moon, whose orb  
Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views  
At evening, from the top of Fesolè,  
Or in Valdarno, to descry new lands,  
Rivers or mountains, in her spotty globe,”—

or to describe the seraph Raphael beholding from afar the earth,—

“As when by night the glass  
Of Galileo, less assured, observes  
Imagined lands and regions in the moon.”

We follow him to Venice, and to Rome,—the city of more than twenty centuries,—and fancy him wrapt with classical associations, feeding his genius by gazing on the sculptures and paintings of Michael Angelo and all the works of Italian Art. And with what feeling must that spirit of his, which seems to have chafed under any

ecclesiastical discipline, have been stirred within the precincts of the papal metropolis! Standing in the shadow of the Vatican, by the side of that vast dominion stretching its thin spectral arms over the whole earth, how must this young Briton, this Protestant, this Independent, have scanned the visage of what one of his contemporaries,\* with an image of Miltonic energy, described as "the ghost of the Roman empire seated on the ruins thereof!"

It was at Rome that Milton is supposed to have met and contracted a lifelong friendship with one of his fellow-countrymen, like himself a young traveller, a poet, and a republican,—the high-spirited and incorruptible Andrew Marvell. It has been well said that not even in the proudest days of her republic had Rome to boast two nobler youths than Milton and Marvell. The young poet proceeded onward to the south of Italy, and was welcomed beneath the hospitable roof of Manso, Marquis of Villa, the friend and biographer of Tasso. It was the very spot where the great Italian poet, a few years before, completed the "*Jerusalem Delivered*;" and it has been conjectured that there first dawned upon the thought of Milton the ambition of composing an epic poem in the English language. It seems to me more probable that this must have been among his more youthful aspirations. But, be that as it may, it was first announced in the Latin poem addressed to his venerable host on taking leave of him. I doubt not, that standing in the gardens overlooking the famed prospect of the bright Bay of Naples, a spot but lately honoured by the footsteps of

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\* Hobbes.

Italy's last best poet, Milton heard the story of Tasso's romantic life—his imprisonment, his sorrows, and his madness—from the lips of Tasso's aged friend; and, though there was not in reserve for the British bard the dark destiny of the dungeon such as the Italian had been immured in, yet the story of the calamitous career of his fellow-poet must have been so impressed upon his feelings as to rise up in his thoughts in after-years, teaching the lesson of endurance beneath sorrows as heavy if not so intense.

Milton's intention of visiting Sicily and Greece was abandoned on learning that afflictions were gathering upon England; and he turned his steps homeward, stopping to visit the kinsfolk of one of the friends of his youth, at their mansion on the Alpine bank of the Lake of Geneva. He hastened back from the continent, because, said he, "I thought it base to be travelling for amusement abroad while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home." When he set foot again on British ground, the banner of civil war had been flung out to the breeze; for the grand Rebellion was begun.

I am dealing, let it be remembered, with the *poet* Milton. When I reflect how mighty and how many were his achievements in poetry,—how they are all complete,—none, like the "Canterbury Tales" and the "Fairy Queen," splendid fragments,—it seems almost incredible that nearly thirty years of his life were almost wholly turned aside from the great highway of his genius. And why was this? Was it because, with the growth of intellectual pride, he was learning to disparage his early aspirations? Was it that poetry had ceased to be that divine thing the love of which had once shone on all

his paths? No! such heartless disloyalty never had place in his thoughts. He never forgot that he had an endowment the voice of which was meant to reach to distant ages and to other lands. But the age and the country in which his lot was cast had instant need of his powers. He beheld the people struggling for freedom; and his heart, with all its high-wrought enthusiasm, was with them. The monarchy had lost much that might make a subject proud. The high-minded nobility, which Milton might have honoured as Spenser had, was no longer in the same strong sympathy with the throne, at once gracing and fortifying it. The Buckhursts and the Cecils and the Egertons had gradually been thrust aside, and their places filled by worthless and profligate favourites,—minions like Carr and Villiers. The low and malignant influences which overshadowed the court of the first of the Stuarts sealed the bloody fate of the second of that hapless dynasty. The civil war began with court corruption; and, in such a contest, where could the soul of Milton be but with the people? He turned aside from poetry reluctantly, but dutifully: he felt himself possessed of a power which fitted him to be the intellectual champion of the cause. For about a quarter of a century his muse was almost forsaken; and during this period his pen produced a succession of controversial writings on various subjects as powerful as ever were produced. When he first entered on this stern duty it was with the avowed sense of inferiority to a strength already proved in poetry,—the better task which the genial power of nature prompted, having, as he said, the use, as it were, of only the left hand. I am inclined, however, to think that, as he prosecuted one controversy

after another, the spirit of controversy got more largely possession of him,—polemic pride growing on him,—exultation at finding that he could deal blows so vigorous with his left hand.

Domestic troubles embittered his life. It is one of the miseries of civil war that it sows the seeds of household animosities. "It was a time," says Milton, in one of his prose works, "when man and wife were often the most inveterate foes; when the man often stayed at home to tend the children, while the mother of the family was busy in the camp of the enemy, threatening death and destruction to her husband." It was Milton's bad fortune to marry in such times,—a speedy match and a sorry marriage; for it mated a republican husband with a royalist spouse.

During these agitated years of Milton's life he never faltered in the duty he had marked out for himself; but still you could sometimes discover the longings of the poet's heart,—something showing that he knew how much more congenial than bandying vulgar and abusive epithets with Salmasius, or toiling in the secretaryship of the Council of the Commonwealth and the Protectorate, would it be for him (to borrow one of his own glowing phrases) to be "soaring in the high region of his fancies, with his garland and singing-robes about him." Now and then the pent-up fire of his imagination bursts out in a strain of prose which is poetry in all but poetry's metrical music; in that sublime sentence, for instance, which tells how high were the expectations his enthusiasm had conceived of Republican England:—"Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.

Methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full mid-day beam, purging and unscaling her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance."

During this middle period of Milton's life, when absorbed with political and theological polemics and state-affairs, the only sign given to show that poetry was not wholly suppressed in his thoughts is to be found in the few sonnets dated in those years, and which are distinguished for a sternness of conception and a compressed energy of style that we may fancy them written at Cromwell's council-board and with the same pen which engrossed some stern despatch from the Protector to his fellow-sovereigns on the continent. The sonnets of Milton are few; but they rendered this important service:—that they enlarged the sphere of that form of verse, showing that it was not confined to amatory poetry; that it was fitted not only for the expression of tender emotions, but for the utterance of a statesmanly philosophy, dignified rebuke, the deep, Christian meditation, and whatever else belongs to poetry's grandest and most majestic tones. The strain which before had scarcely served more than a lover's uses was made the fit form for the stern Republican to address Cromwell and Fairfax and Sir Harry Vane. There is a contrast as wide as between the temperaments of the two poets between the sonnet of Spenser and the sonnet of Milton:—

"A glowworm Lamp,

It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land  
To struggle through dark ways; and, when a damp  
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand  
The thing became a Trumpet, whence he blew  
Soul-animating strains,—alas! too few!"

There is recorded in Boswell's Johnson one of the most ludicrous literary conversations touching Milton's sonnets—ludicrous from its solemn absurdity—to be met with amid all the absurdities of criticism. "Pray, sir," said Miss Hannah More to Dr. Johnson, "how could a poet who wrote 'Paradise Lost' write such poor sonnets?" "Madam," replied the critical autocrat, "Milton was a genius that could cut a colossus from a rock but could not carve heads upon cherry-stones." Miss Hannah More was a sensible as well as a very pious woman, but on this occasion, I very much fear, she asked a foolish question; and Dr. Johnson was a wise and a learned man, but I fear the folly of the question was contagious to the answer. If Hannah More had searched Johnson's Dictionary through, she could not have selected a more inappropriate epithet than in speaking of such *poor* sonnets as Milton's; and, as to his figure of the carved cherry-stones, let us look at one of these condemned productions. At the time when Milton was acting as the Latin Secretary of the government of Cromwell, there was given one of the highest proofs of the gigantic foreign policy for which the proud Protector was most illustrious. The persecuted Protestants in the valleys of Piedmont appealed to him for succour; and the stern voice of Cromwell went forth to every potentate of Europe, bidding him know that he meant to make the cause of these suffering Christians his own:—

"When Alpine vales threw forth a suppliant cry,  
The majesty of England interposed,  
And the sword stopped; the bleeding wounds were closed,  
And faith preserved her ancient purity."



The spokesman of Oliver Cromwell's will was John Milton; and there seems to be a tone of imagination in the very address of some of these despatches;—a Miltonic aggregation of vague geographical names:—"Oliver, Protector of the Commonwealth of England, to the Emperor of all Russia and all the Northern climes;" or to "the King of the Swedes, Goths, and Vandals;" calling to their remembrance how the valleys of Piedmont were besmeared with the blood and slaughter of the miserable victims and the mountains filled with the houseless wanderers,—women and children perishing with hunger and cold and the sword of the persecutor. The spirit of Milton was so stirred by the sufferings of the Waldenses that he felt the need of more even than high-toned mandates to earthly monarchs; and therefore there went up from the depths of his poet's heart, in one of his mighty sonnets, the fervid imprecation:—

"Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones  
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold;—  
E'en them who kept thy truth so pure of old,  
When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones,  
Forget not: in thy book record their groans  
Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient fold  
Slain by the bloody Piedmontese, that rolled  
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans  
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they  
To Heaven. Their martyred blood and ashes sow  
O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway  
The triple tyrant; that from these may grow  
A hundredfold, who, having learned thy way,  
Early may fly the Babylonian wo."

After rehearsing this high and solemn strain of poetry, I can scarcely bring myself to remind you of the pitiful comparison of Dr. Johnson's which I hoped to refute by it.

All the visionary enthusiasm of Milton in the cause of political liberty was, as is well known, wholly defeated. We come now to the last—the darkest and yet most glorious—portion of his life, divided as it may be into three chief eras:—as a student, as a statesman, and a solitary.

There are few finer themes for contemplation than the hermit old age of John Milton. “My mind,” said Coleridge, “is not capable of forming a more august conception than arises from the contemplation of this great man in his latter days. Poor, sick, old, blind, slandered, persecuted,—in an age in which he was as little understood by the party *for* whom, as by that *against* whom he had contended,—and among men before whom he strode so far as to dwarf himself by the distance,—yet still listening to the music of his own thoughts, or, if additionally cheered, yet cheered only by the prophetic faith of two or three solitary individuals, he did nevertheless

“Argue not  
Against Heaven’s hand or will, nor bate a jot  
Of heart or hope; but still bore up, and steered  
Right onward.”

Wordsworth, too, has told of its moral sublimity:—

“One there is who builds immortal lays,  
Though doomed to tread in solitary ways,  
Darkness before, and Danger’s voice behind!  
Yet not alone, nor helpless to repel  
Sad thoughts; for, from above the starry sphere  
Come secrets whispered nightly to his ear;  
And the pure spirit of celestial light  
Shines through his soul, that he may see and tell  
Of things invisible to mortal sight.”

I have followed the progress of Milton's genius, dwelling on some of his neglected pieces, till but scant space is left for thought on his great poem. The gradual ascent to the highest point of his fame being accomplished, no more can now be done than to take a brief prospect from the pinnacle of this holy mount. The "Paradise Lost" was given to the world in 1667, the author being then on the verge of sixty years. I cannot bring myself to believe for one moment that he had ever relinquished his early ambition of an English epic poem; but it is probable that the work was not begun till the restoration of the monarchy threw the Republican back into meditative solitude and closed the anxieties of his long and embittered disputations. I shall not be so presumptuous as to enter now on any even general criticism of so elaborate a poem. The hurried comment I might at present make would be but a poor substitute for the ample criticism which should be devoted to such a theme: its sublimity, its beauty, are familiar to all. But grievous injustice is done to the poem by reading detached portions of it; for perhaps above all other epic poems it is admirable for the composition of it:—I mean its entire structure, and the order and succession of its parts. It combines in this respect the dramatic with the epic spirit; and I find myself always impressed by it as by the perusal of a tragedy, which, indeed, was the form originally contemplated by Milton. It is a poem demanding from its reader the most strenuous activity of a reader's imagination; otherwise he will find himself left immeasurably below the range of its inventions. For instance: in the wondrous imaginations of Satan's voyage,—first exploring his way on swift wings, one while sinking into

the deep, and then rising to the fiery concave,—still within his own vast realms of Pandemonium;—after he has passed hell's gates, standing with awe and looking into the wild abyss before venturing to pass the dark pavilion of Chaos;—then, springing upward like a pyramid of fire and reaching the utmost orb of the regions of light, the fiend weighs his spread wings to behold afar off the empyreal heaven:—

“And, fast by, hanging in a golden chain,  
This pendent world, in bigness as a star  
Of smallest magnitude close by the moon.”

Now, in this the imagination is apt to falter and supply the thought that by “this pendent world” is meant this one little planet of ours,—the earth. But Milton's imagination knew no such circumscription; and his conception was—not the earth, not even the space filled by the sun, with all its planets and their satellites, but—the vast orb of myriads of suns, the measureless space of countless solar systems; and all this was meant when the arch-fiend was gazing at

“This pendent world, in bigness as a star  
Of smallest magnitude close by the moon.”

Again: what a transcendent effort is that by which, in recounting the hosts of Pandemonium, the poet's imagination, grasping the whole mythology of classical antiquity, thrusts it with all its glory down into hell, and ranges the gods of Greece—Olympic Jove himself—with the inferior powers of the apostate angels! In an early lecture of this course, when attempting to portray the faculty of imagination, I claimed for it the power of either giving dignity and beauty to life's daily and common events, or,

rising higher, of beholding, as an angel might, this earth, with its dark sea, with all that is vile upon its surface, and with the nations of the dead mouldering beneath, yet a star glittering in the firmament and peopled with beings redeemed for immortality. I recur to the thought because the poetic inventions of Milton are authoritative—to show that I was indulging in no irrational rhapsody. Behold, for instance, how he has enveloped in a radiant glory the common incident which was the groundwork of “Comus.” And, in “Paradise Lost,” how the angels speak as if their words came indeed from an angel’s heart!—they tell of things as if seen with an angel’s vision. When Raphael, the sociable spirit, rises from his conference with Adam, it is because to his eye

“The parting sun,  
Beyond the earth’s green cape and verdant isles  
Hesperian, sets,—my signal to depart.”

And when he cautions our first parents to be lowly wise, observe how he speaks of the earth as if he had beheld it looking from some other sphere, when he bids Adam not to seek to know

“Whether the sun, predominant in heaven,  
Rise on the earth, or earth rise on the sun;—  
He from the east his flaming road begin,  
Or she from west her silent course advance  
With inoffensive pace, that, spinning, sleeps  
On her soft axle, while she paces even  
And bears thee soft with the smooth air along.”

But no product of the Miltonic imagination needs deeper study than the character of Satan, the chief fiend, wrapt in the twilight of original brightness in dim eclipse, a lurid glory giving him a grandeur such as

poetry had never created before; for it was the image of no less than "archangel ruined," whose "face deep scars of thunder had intrenched." It was an embodiment of poetic sublimity—a might of endurance, of boldness, and of pride—which awes the imagination, and, at times, wildly stirs, not a sympathy, but some sort of feeling for the ruined angelic splendour. How can we repress some such emotion at that passage where, standing on the beach of the inflamed sea, and rising to his full height with monarchal pride, Satan summons the entranced legions?—a passage demonstrating, too, the wondrous opulence of Milton's imagination, pouring out one illustration after another as they rise up in his mind with the recollection of his Italian travels and of his classical and Biblical learning,—a profusion of thick-sown similitudes,—the leaf-strewn brooks of Vallombrosa, the scattered sedge of the Red Sea vexed by the stormy Orion and the floating carcasses of Pharaoh's horsemen:—

"On the beach

Of that inflaméd sea he stood, and called  
His legions,—Angel-forms, who lay entranced,  
Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks  
In Vallombrosa, where the Etrurian shades  
High overarched embower; or scattered sedge  
Afloat, when with fierce winds Orion armed  
Hath vexed the Red Sea coast, whose waves o'erthrew  
Busiris and his Memphian chivalry,  
While with perfidious hatred they pursued  
The sojourners of Goshen, who beheld  
From the safe shore their floating carcasses  
And broken chariot-wheels; so thick bestrown,  
Abject and lost, lay these, covering the flood,  
Under amazement of their hideous change.  
He called so loud, that all the hollow deep  
Of Hell resounded."

This burst of what may be called the *material* sublime—arising from the grandeur of space and sound, things of sense—is followed soon by a burst of the *moral* sublime; for, when the myriads of immortal spirits thronged around their chief, and the peerage of Pandemonium stood mute in expectation of Satan's voice,—

“Thrice he assayed, and thrice, in spite of scorn,  
Tears, such as angels weep, burst forth.”

It is an observation of Coleridge's that it is very remarkable that in no part of his writings does Milton take any notice of the great painters of Italy, nor, indeed, of painting as an art; while every other page breathes his love and taste for music; and that, in the “Paradise Lost,” Adam bending over the sleeping Eve was the only proper *picture* he remembered. This criticism was made in forgetfulness of one of the most *picturesque* passages in that or any poem,—Adam hearing the first report of Eve's transgression. It will be remembered that

“Adam the while,  
Waiting desirous her return, had wove  
Of choicest flowers a garland, to adorn  
Her tresses, and her rural labours crown,  
As reapers oft are wont their harvest-queen.  
Great joy he promised to his thoughts, and new  
Solace in her return, so long delayed;  
Yet oft his heart, divine of something ill,  
Mistake him; he the faltering measure felt,  
And forth to meet her went, the way she took  
That morn when first they parted.”

The tragic tale of the unresisted temptation is soon told:—

“Adam, soon as he heard  
The fatal trespass done by Eve, amazed,  
Astonied stood and blank, while horror chill

Ran through his veins and all his joints relaxed.  
From his slack hand the garland wreathed for Eve  
Down dropped, and all the faded roses shed.  
Speechless he stood, and pale."

It should not be overlooked how far the subject of our English epic transcends that of all others. In comparison, how does the Trojan war, the wanderings of Ulysses, of Æneas, or the argument of either of the great Christian epics of modern Italy, dwindle by the side! The "Paradise Lost" is the story of the deepest tragedy this earth has ever known,—the tragedy which has caused all other tragedies. While there have been flashing over it the sullen fires from the dark abodes of the rebel angels and from the presence of Satan, there is shed on the catastrophe a soft, pathetic light, giving to the poem that sweet and gentle ending which, familiar though it be, rather would I pass by, as I am doing, a thousand other things than it. The angry contentions of this unhappy pair had passed away; love, which had fled with their innocence, came back with their submissive repentance. God in his mercy sent an angel to speak hope to the crushed spirit of Adam. He sent a happy dream to give hope to the heart of Eve. The two whom sympathy of happiness had united were now one in the sympathy of sorrow. Mercifully they were led forth at the *eastern* gate; so that when hand in hand they wandered solitary, no longer blessed with the visible presence of God or his angels, their tear-dimmed eyes might turn to the Orient, where the far-off light of the promised redemption was rising on their darkened hearts:—when, the cherubim descending to their station, and the brandished sword of God blazing fierce as a comet,—



"In either hand the hastening angel caught  
Our lingering parents, and to the eastern gate  
Led them direct, and down the cliff as first  
To the subjected plain ; then disappeared.  
They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld  
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,  
Waved over by that flaming brand ; the gate  
With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms.  
Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon.  
The world was all before them where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide :  
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way."

Of Milton's later poem—the "Paradise Regained"—I have space but for one remark. It has never attained its just fame, because it is forever forced into irrational comparison with the "Paradise Lost." It is essentially different in its whole character, for the simplest of all reasons,—its adaptation to the nature of its subject ; a difference analogous, as has been remarked, to that between the style of the Old and New Testaments. The poem is entitled to a judgment by a positive standard, and thus only can justice be rendered to its admirable meditative imagination. There is a tradition that the poet himself always denied its inferiority to the "Paradise Lost." I am strongly inclined to think that this meant that he resented what he knew was a senseless comparison of two poems intrinsically different. The "Paradise Regained" gives no sanction to the opinion that it betrays a failure of the author's genius. It was an appropriation of his powers to a new and different kind of poetic creation.

The last of his poems was the "Samson Agonistes,"—an English drama in the severest classical form of the Greek tragedy. The student of Milton's poetry will

read it with enthusiasm, were it only for its shadowing forth the author's own fortunes,—his dearest hopes betrayed, and left, old and blind, among enemies. The poet was a man to bow without repining to his Maker's will, dark as that will might be; and I cannot help thinking that this tragic drama was an invention for him to relieve his overcharged heart,—to utter complaints,—to say more bitter things with the tongue of Samson than with his own. We can fancy it the voice of John Milton when the once indomitable but now captive Israelite breaks for thin that piteous and withal majestic utterance of a blind man's agony :—

“ Oh, dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,  
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse  
Without all hope of day!  
‘ Let there be light, and light was over all.’  
Why am I thus bereaved thy prime decree?  
The sun to me is dark  
And silent as the moon,  
When she deserts the night,  
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.”

In the early part of this lecture I spoke of what had struck me as the magnanimity of Milton's boyhood. That magnanimity had grown with the labours and afflictions of his eventful life; and the parting thought I have of this great poet finds expression in the last words of his last poem :—that he was one whom God

“ With peace and consolation hath dismissed,  
And calm of mind, all passion spent.”

## LECTURE VII.

### Minor Poetry of the Seventeenth Century.

Character of the transition from Milton to Dryden—The rank of Dryden among the poets—English imagination in his age—Influence of Milton's genius upon his contemporaries and successors—Wordsworth's apostrophe to Milton—Decline of imaginative energy—Metaphysical poetry—Daniel and Drayton—Drayton's *Polyolbion*—Lamb's notice of this poem—Donne and Cowley—The sin of this school of poetry—Poetry a subject for studious thoughtfulness—Donne's "Lecture"—Character of Cowley's genius—His prose essays—"The Complaint"—The conceits of the poetry of this period—Herbert's lines on Virtue; Life; Peace—Herbert's self-criticism—Sacred poetry of the seventeenth century—Robert Herrick—His Litany to the Holy Spirit—The music of his verse—Literary interest of the Civil War—Lord Chatham on the character of this struggle—The Puritan system adverse to poetic culture—Richard Lovelace—"To Althea, from prison"—George Wither—His character—His address to his Muse—A tribute to Wither's memory.

IN tracing the progress of English Poetry thus far, there has been no occasion for doubt in selecting the poets who may justly be deemed its representatives in different eras. The light of poetic inspiration first held on high by old Chaucer was given in succession to the giant hands of Spenser, of Shakspeare, and of Milton,—men of such might that no one ventures to question the supremacy of any of them in his own age. We have moved on,

turning over the annals of a dynasty of noble poets,—the noblest of their kind. Preserving the historical character of these lectures, I pass from the name of Milton to that of Dryden. But this is a transition not to be made without pausing to reflect on the changes that at that period were beginning to pass over the spirit of the English Muse. The transition is a transition of descent: it will bring us down into a lower region. We have been dwelling among the mountains, and have caught the voice of poetry carried on from one lofty peak to another; and, after listening to the solemn strains of the “Paradise Lost” echoing in the upper air, we hear the next sound, far away, rising up in the lowlands. Is it then at all surprising that I am approaching this period of English poetry with reluctance? I find I am making excuses to myself for lingering a while longer in the high and pure atmosphere,—a sunny region full of life,—when the path I must follow leads precipitately down into a valley not wholly free from unwholesome shades and fogs obscuring the placid canopy of the blue sky.

The most indulgent criticism appropriates to Dryden no higher station than the first rank among the secondary English poets. His period is the last thirty years of the seventeenth century. The character of the literature was undergoing a great change. The spirit of the nation, too, was changing; and its poetry especially betrayed sympathy and suffering with the change, for it was losing much of its distinctive character. Public opinion and feeling were, by the operation of causes remaining to be noticed, abased and corrupted; and poetry did not escape the contagion. The high moral tone of the Muse of the great earlier poets was lowered; and English imagination, part-

ing with a portion of its native strength and simplicity, became at once a meaner and more mechanical thing. The change was not a sudden one; at least there had been indications of it at a much earlier period; and I propose, therefore, before closing the examination of the poetry of the seventeenth century with Dryden, to glance over the previous portions of that century, for the purpose of ascertaining what were the various manifestations of its literature, and especially those tending to form its fashion, at the close of that age. In this it will be necessary to notice some of the poets whom I passed by when I entered on the subject of my last lecture. It will be perceived that I am taking the liberty of deviating a little from the original prospectus of the course, in devoting one lecture (the present) to the minor poetry of the seventeenth century; it being my intention to appropriate the next lecture to the poetry of both Dryden and Pope, the times of the Restoration and of Queen Anne.

In taking a retrospect of the literary character and influence of any age, it is necessary to guard against falling into the error of supposing that an author whose fame has been realized by posterity possessed equal repute and authority in his own day. I selected, for instance, without hesitation, Milton, as the great poet of the middle of the seventeenth century; and yet the poetry of Milton was far from being the influential—the dominant—poetry of those times. Smaller stars were in the ascendant. When we come, therefore, to the transition from Milton to Dryden, the poetry of the latter differs so essentially from the former that one would be at fault in comprehending the change in so short a space of time, unless we turn to other poetry to discover in it some

intimations of the poetic style with which the century closed. If the genius of Milton had early gained the same hold it has since acquired over the thoughtful admiration of later times, English poetry never could have assumed so readily the guise it wore in the years immediately subsequent to the "Paradise Lost." It seems strange, but, I believe, correct, when I say that I can discover no influence exerted by the great productions of Milton upon the character of his poetical contemporaries or immediate successors. Indeed, he lived and died with as little congeniality manifested by the world as ever served to sustain the heart of genius. Happily for the world of all ages, that heart had a better-sustaining power, in the sense of its own majesty, and its trust upon heavenly guardianship. Excepting a few true friends, such as the Republican poet Marvell and the kind-hearted Ellwood, (a name which may be dear not only to his own Society of Friends, but to all that speak the English tongue, were it only for the happy prompting of the idea of "Paradise Regained,")—with the exception of a few like these, Milton earned no sympathies for the muse of his later years,—the great years of his poetic career. His spirit was aloof from all their modes of thought and feeling; and, thus contemplating him, has Wordsworth finely apostrophized his illustrious predecessor, Milton :—

"Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart;  
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;  
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free :  
So didst thou travel on life's common way  
In cheerful godliness, and yet thy heart  
The lowliest duties on herself did lay."

The literary period of Dryden and those amidst whom he was pre-eminent was in no respect, that I can perceive, affected by the best poetry which had gone before. The current of poetry the public taste was floating on was like the slow—the regulated and artificial—stream of a canal; while at the same time, close beside it, the mighty river of Milton's genius was flowing at his own sweet will, copiously, impetuously, majestically, in its native channel and with its native tides. What were the poetic authorities where Milton's influence was unavailing I shall endeavour to ascertain in this and the next lecture.

Before doing so, it will be necessary to discover the agencies which in the earlier part of the century had begun to give a direction to English poetry. The poetry which we have been contemplating in the previous lectures was eminently and gloriously imaginative. In all that proceeded from Spenser and Shakspeare and Milton, it was obvious that the controlling faculty was imagination; it was pure and high poetry,—the product of the great characteristic of poetic genius,—that combination of fancy, judgment, meditation, and invention, which together constitute imagination in its most comprehensive form, and whose prime glory is its perpetual truth to nature. The great change that came over English poetry was the departure from nature, and the decline of *imaginative* energy.

The English nation, under the stirring influences of the Reformation, had become a deeply-thinking, reflective, and learned people. A philosophical condition of opinion prevailed; and, while those who combined with it an imaginative cast of mind would find all their hearts could desire on the pages of the great poets,—food for

meditation and food for imagination in the storehouses of Spenser and Shakspeare,—there was another order of minds, to whom was supplied a poetry more congenial, for it showed an increased activity of the *reasoning* faculties and a diminished vigour of imagination. From this condition of public taste arose two schools of poetry. The first and best of these the *philosophical poetry*, as it has been styled, because it brought within the territory of poetry subjects usually left to the analytical processes of the understanding; such, for instance, as the immortality of the soul and its various functions. The second of these schools is that which has obtained inappropriately the title of the *metaphysical poetry*;—inappropriately, because no one has yet discovered why it should be so called, and also because the epithet would aptly belong to the other species of poetry, called, somewhat ambiguously, the philosophical. In both of these, those qualities which are deemed the essential elements of poetical composition are either placed on a level with or made subordinate to other qualities of the mind. I have no wish to adopt so strict a creed as wholly to exclude argumentative poetry; but it is proper to appreciate that it can never be elevated to the high order of inspiration, because it is addressed not to the imagination, or even to the fancy or the heart, but to the understanding.

There are two poets of the early part of the seventeenth century whom I cannot find in my heart to pass by in absolute silence,—contemporaries of Spenser and Shakspeare,—Daniel and Drayton. The poems of the former are distinguished both for a purity and naturalness of diction and a tenderness of feeling and elevated thought which give them a high value. In the whole catalogue



of English poets there is no one more right-minded, more right-hearted, than Samuel Daniel. The moral tone of his genius may be illustrated in such a passage as this description of what he calls "the concord of a well-tuned mind:"—

"He that of such a height hath built his mind,  
And reared the dwelling of his thoughts so strong,  
As neither fear nor hope can shake the frame  
Of his resolvéd powers, nor all the wind  
Of vanity or malice piece to wrong  
His settled peace, or to disturb the same,—  
What a fair seat hath he, from whence he may  
The boundless wastes and wilds of man survey!

"And with how free an eye doth he look down  
Upon these lower regions of turmoil!  
Where all the storms of passion mainly beat  
On flesh and blood; where honour, power, renown,  
Are only gay afflictions, golden toil;  
Where greatness stands upon as feeble feet  
As frailty doth, and only great doth seem  
To little minds who do it so esteem.

\* \* \* \*

"And while distraught ambition compasses  
And is encompassed,—whilst as craft deceives  
And is deceived,—whilst man doth ransuchen\* man,  
And builds on blood, and rises by distress,  
And the inheritance of desolation leaves  
To great-expecting hopes,—he looks thereon,  
As from the shore of peace, with unwet eye,  
And bears no venture in impiety;

"Knowing the heart of man is set to be  
The centre of this world, about the which  
These revolutions of disturbances  
Still roll; where all the aspécts of misery

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\* Ransack.

Predominate; whose strong effects are such  
 As he must bear, being powerless to redress;  
 And that unless above himself he can  
 Erect himself,—how poor a thing is man!"

I can stop to notice only one other passage, having a double interest, as expressing his thoughtful pride in the power of the English language, and as prophetic of the spread of that language over the vast regions of America:—

"Should we, careless, come behind the rest  
 In power of words, that go before in worth,  
 When as our accents, equal to the best,  
 Is able greater wonders to bring forth?  
 When all that ever hotter spirits expressed  
 Comes bettered by the patience of the North?  
 And who (in time) knows whither we may vent  
 The treasure of our tongue?—to what strange shores  
 This gain of our best glory shall be sent,  
 T'enrich unknowing nations with our stores?—  
 What worlds in the yet unform'd Occident  
 May come refined with the accents that are ours?"

The other poet I have alluded to—Michael Drayton—deserves a better fame than the world has given him, were it to rest only on his most elaborate work,—the "Polyolbion,"—the most extraordinary production, in some respects, that ever issued from poetic imagination. It was the first, and probably will be the last, topographical poem on the records of poetry. He is the panegyrist of his native country, the main subject of his poem being the rivers of England; and, as Charles Lamb has said of him, "he has gone over the soil with the fidelity of a herald and the painful love of a son; he has not left a rivulet, so narrow that it may be stepped over, without honour-

able mention, and has animated hills and streams with life and passion above the dreams of old mythology." The poem, which is one of the longest in the language, is composed in the rarely-used verse of twelve syllables known by the name of "Alexandrine," and, while combining a most elaborate accumulation of historic, legendary, and fabulous tradition, is distinguished for a higher strain of imagination than might at first be expected from a theme so unpromising for the purposes of poetry as topography. But it should be remembered that with the rivers of a country a thousand associations—actual and mythical—are forever flowing. At the mere mention of such names as the Jordan, the Nile, the Tiber, the Rhine, the Thames, the Tweed, or the mournful Yarrow, or the history-honoured, blood-stained waters of our own land, how do thoughts and feelings rise up in our minds as unceasing as their springs! Among these early poets there are few to whose neglected memory the student will feel, on acquaintance, more disposed to render affectionate and dutiful homage than Michael Drayton; and let us part with him, holding in our recollections one of his smaller pieces, which would bear comparison with the best of that species of poetry in which there has been so much of worthless effusion;—I mean amatory poetry;—for, from Anacreon down to Moore, I know of no lines on the old subject of lovers' quarrels, distinguished for equal tenderness of sentiment and richness of fancy. Especially may be observed the exquisite gracefulness in the transition from the familiar tone in the first part of the sonnet to the deeper feeling and the higher strain of imagination at the close:—

"Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part.

Nay, I have done: you get no more of me;

And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart,

That thus so cleanly I myself can free!

Shake hands forever; cancel all our vows;

And, when we meet at any time again,

Be it not seen in either of our brows

That we one jot of former love retain.

*Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,*

*When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,*

*When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death*

*And Innocence is closing up his eyes,*

*Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,*

*From death to life thou might'st him yet recover."*

While Daniel and Drayton preserved in their poetry—if not in high elevation, at least in just proportions—the various elements of thought and feeling and fancy, the early and middle parts of the seventeenth century produced two other poets whose influence was wider and more abiding. It is usual to regard Donne, the Dean of St. Paul's, as the first, and Cowley as the chief, of the metaphysical poets, as they have been styled. The irredeemable sin of this school of poetry was its sacrifice of nature, and, consequently, of poetic truth. The rule of its inspiration was abandonment of simplicity. Natural imagery, natural feeling, and passion,—natural expression,—all were insufficient to reach the standard-mark of its extravagance. It was deemed the perfection of poetry so to entangle every poetic image or impulse in a maze of scholastic allusions, in forced and arbitrary turns of thought, paradoxes, antitheses, quaintnesses, subtleties, that the reader's chief pleasure must have been the exercise of a correspondent and inappropriate ingenuity in discovering the path of the labyrinth. It could have

been no more than the negative satisfaction in unravelling a riddle. Still, to readers of acutely-intellectual habits of mind, the exercise of reading this poetry, we can readily understand, brought a certain kind and a considerable amount of mental satisfaction, which became a substitute for the imaginative delight imparted by true poetry, and perhaps mistaken for it. The feeling was much more akin to a mathematician's pleasure in some achievement in his severe abstractions, or to that of an adroit chess-player. Let me not for one moment be understood as condemning this poetry because it demands thought; for, if there be any one principle I am more anxious to inculcate than another in this course of lectures, it is that all the highest and purest poetry can be appreciated only by studious and imaginative thoughtfulness. It is this error which greatly is the cause of false and low tastes in poetry. I have not treated, in the previous lectures, of any one poet whose genius can be approached otherwise than with due meditation. But the poetry I am now speaking of demands not so much thought as shrewdness, acuteness, ingenuity, intellectual dexterity; or perhaps it would describe it more justly, as well as more favourably, to say that it demands thought and nothing but thought,—no imagination, no passion, which are the life of real poetry. I might, for instance, select many pieces of this poetry, and before I had reached a dozen lines I should have perplexed and bewildered both you and myself. It may safely be said to be a poetry which makes it necessary for the reader to have, to use the familiar phrase, his wits about him. A short piece of Donne's, entitled "A Lecture," is as favourable a specimen as I can cite to characterize both his merits and his faults. This

species of poetry prevailed for so considerable a time, and had such influence, that, in a course on English poetry, it cannot well be passed by. It is, however, only a very small amount of it I shall ask your endurance of:—

“Stand still, and I will read to thee  
A lecture, love, in Love’s philosophy.  
These three hours that we have spent  
Walking here, two shadows went  
Along with us, which we ourselves produced.  
But, now the sun is just above our head,  
We do those shadows tread,  
And to brave clearness all things are reduced.  
So, whilst our infant loves did grow,  
Disguises did, and shadows, flow  
From us, and from our cares: now, ’tis not so  
That love hath not attained the highest degree  
Which is still diligent lest others see;  
Except our loves at this noon stay,  
We shall new shadows make the other way.  
The morning shadows wear away;  
But these grow larger all the day.”

On this quaint piece of poetry I have no other comment to make than to say that a courtship must have been an exceedingly formidable business when the wooing was done in this style. It was the remark of one of the philosophical poets of the seventeenth century, in allusion to the copiousness of his fancy, that he was forced to cut his way through a crowd of thoughts as through a wood. The remark applies to all of them. That school of poetry laboured under a very unusual difficulty,—an excess of intellectual activity; for the more frequent peril of poetry is that its metrical music is too often made to conceal an emptiness of thought; and so it is that rhyme is sometimes taken as the antithesis of reason. These poets

under consideration arrayed not only the thoughts which their strong intellect and large scholarship naturally suggested, but ingenuity was tortured to gather from all quarters all possible devices. Their poems abound with conceits wonderfully far-fetched, often worth little after all. In short, the poetry was fantastic instead of imaginative. It is instructive, however, sometimes to find nature breaking through the throng of these inventions; some strong passion bursting the bonds of a false taste,—false both in conception and expression,—and finding utterance in hearty simplicity of speech.

Of the ability of so fantastic a poet as Donne to express a simple thought in simple words, I cannot give better proof than the two admirable lines quoted in a former lecture, of his epitaph on Shakspeare :—

“Under this curléd marble of thine own,  
Sleep, rare tragedian, Shakspeare, sleep alone.”

The chief representative of this poetry was Cowley,—a man, however, of poetic genius, with a poet’s mind and a poet’s sensibility, sadly as he was shackled by the influence of a false, and of course temporary, fashion. He was the contemporary of Milton, and far more prosperous in a speedy popularity,—the poet of the Royalists, as Milton was of the Republicans. That quick success was gained at the cost of an enduring and higher fame; and it is impossible to read the poetry of Cowley without mourning over the sacrifice. No cultivation, it is true, could have made him one of the greatest poets; but it might have made him much greater than he was. From childhood he had a poet’s heart. In one of his admirable prose essays,—admirable for a native simplicity greatly contrasted

with the overwrought fancy of his verse,—he says, “I remember, when I began to read and to take some pleasure in it, there was wont to lie in my mother’s parlour, (I know not by what accident; for she herself never in her life read any book but of devotion;)—but there was wont to lie Spenser’s works. This I happened to fall upon, and was infinitely delighted with the stories of the knights and giants and monsters and brave houses which I found everywhere there, (though my understanding had little to do with all this,) and, by degrees, with the tinkling of the rhyme and dance of the numbers; so that, I think, I had read him all over before I was twelve years old, and was thus made a poet in childhood.” It would have been well for Cowley if his *understanding* had not had quite so much to do with his own poetry, and his imagination and native feeling more. He was involved in the turmoil of the civil war, not to come out of it, like his mighty contemporary, Milton, with powers invigorated by the strife and ready to gather them for the composition of an immortal poem, but rather to lament over the loss of congenial pursuits, and self-sacrifice in a thankless cause. His loyalty was rewarded by a heartless monarch’s ingratitude; and one of the best of Cowley’s poems is that entitled “The Complaint,” composed when shades were gathering over the evening of his days:—

“In a deep vision’s intellectual scene,  
Beneath a bower for sorrows made,—  
The uncomfortable shade  
Of the black yew’s unlucky green  
Mixed with the mourning willow’s careful gray  
Where reverend Cam cuts out his famous way,  
The melancholy Cowley lay;



And lo! a Muse appeared to 's closéd sight,  
 (The Muses oft in lands of vision play,)  
 Bodied, arrayed, and seen by an internal light.  
 A golden harp with silver strings she bore;  
 A wondrous hieroglyphic robe she wore,  
 In which all colours and all figures were  
 That nature or that fancy can create,  
 That art can never imitate.

\* \* \* \*

She touched him with her harp and raised him from the ground.  
 The shaken strings melodiously resound.

'Art thou returned at last,' said she,  
 'To this forsaken place and me?

Thou prodigal, who didst so loosely waste  
 Of all thy youthful years the good estate;  
 Art thou returned here, to repent too late  
 And gather husks of learning up at last,  
 Now the rich harvest-time of life is past,  
 And winter marches on so fast?

\* \* \* \*

When I resolved to exalt thy anointed name  
 Among the spiritual lords of peaceful fame,  
 Thou changeling! thou, bewitched with noise and show,  
 Wouldst into courts and cities from me go;  
 Wouldst see the world abroad, and have a share  
 In all the follies and the tumults there.  
 Thou wouldst, forsooth, be something in a state;  
 And business thou wouldst find and wouldst create.

'Go, renegado, cast up thy account;

And see to what amount

Thy foolish gains by quitting me:—

The sale of knowledge, fame, and liberty,  
 The fruits of thy unlearned apostasy.

Thou thought'st, if once the public storm were past,  
 All thy remaining life should sunshine be:  
 Behold! the public storm is spent at last;  
 The sovereign's tossed at sea no more;  
 And thou, with all the noble company,  
 Art got at last to shore.

But, whilst thy fellow-voyagers I see  
 All marched up to possess the promised land,  
 Thou, still alone, alas! dost gaping stand  
 Upon the naked beach, upon the barren sand.'

"Thus spake the Muse, and spake it with a smile  
 That seemed at once to pity and revile.  
 And to her thus, raising his thoughtful head,  
     The melancholy Cowley said,  
     'Ah, wanton foe! dost thou upbraid  
     The ills which thou thyself hast made?  
 When in the cradle innocent I lay,  
 Thou, wicked spirit, stolest me away,  
     And my abuséd soul didst bear  
 Into thy new-found worlds, I know not where,—  
     Thy golden Indies in the air.  
     And ever since I strive in vain  
     My ravished freedom to regain;  
 Still I rebel, still thou dost reign;  
 Lo! still in verse against thee I complain.  
     There is a sort of stubborn weeds  
 Which, if the earth but once, it ever, breeds;  
     No wholesome herb can near them thrive,  
     No useful plant can keep alive.  
 The foolish sports I did on thee bestow  
 Make all my art and labour fruitless now;  
*Where once such fairies dance, no grass doth ever grow."*

In estimating the poetry of this period, it is very common to condemn it for the conceits it abounds with. This is a censure in which it is necessary to exercise some caution. It is true that simplicity of thought is a precious element of poetry, as distinguished from complications and involutions and entanglements of thought. The fault in many of these poets was, that, not content with a thought or feeling in its first simple form, they wandered far away from it in search of all fantastic allu-

sions; and when they bring you back to the original thought or feeling its life is gone;—it is dead and spiritless. These are what are called *cold conceits*. But it has been well said that a conceit is not necessarily cold. The mind, in certain states of passion, finds comfort in playing with occult or casual resemblances, and dallies with the echo of a sound. What is not a conceit to those who read it in a temper different from that in which the writer composed it? The most pathetic parts of poetry to cold tempers seem and are nonsense, as divinity was to the Greeks foolishness. When Richard the Second, meditating on his own utter annihilation as to royalty, cries out,—

Oh that I were a mockery-king of snow,  
Standing before the sun of Bolingbroke,  
To melt myself away in water-drops!"—

If we have been going on pace for pace with the passion before, this sudden conversion of a strong-felt metaphor into something to be actually realized in nature, like that of Jeremiah,—“Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears!”—is strictly and strikingly natural. But come unprepared upon it, and it is a conceit; and so is a “head” turned into “waters.”

It is necessary to understand that real feeling may be compatible with a great deal of eccentricity of thought and quaintness of imagery in poetry, in order to appreciate those singular strains which, fancy-wrought as they are, were uttered from the very bottom of the heart of that sweet singer, George Herbert. It is poetry with many of the characteristics of the serious poetry of the seventeenth century, but with feeling, fancy, and thought blended together in proportions unlike the combination on any other pages. It is essentially devotional,—devotion,

with Fancy serving it with the speed and wildness of a fairy's movements, taking any shape that poetic ingenuity could give, with the hope, that

"A verse may catch a wandering soul that flies  
Profounder tracts, and, by a blest surprise,  
Convert delight into a sacrifice."

What, in its way, can be more pleasing than the sweet moralizing in what are perhaps his best-known lines,—on virtue?—

"Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky,  
The dew shall weep thy fall to-night;  
For thou must die.

"Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,  
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye,  
Thy root is ever in its grave;  
And thou must die.

"Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,—  
A box where sweets compacted lie,—  
My music show ye have your closes;  
And all must die.

"Only a sweet and virtuous soul,  
Like seasoned timber, never gives,  
But, though the whole world turn to coal,  
Then chiefly lives."

His lines on "Life" have somewhat a more solemn strain, but so gentle a warning to mortality that even the young, light heart of beauty, happy with its innocent tribute of flowers, may not unwillingly receive a salutary pensiveness:—

"I made a posy while the day ran by :  
Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie  
My life within this band.  
But Time did beckon to the flowers, and they  
By noon most cunningly did steal away,  
And withered in my hand.

"My hand was next to them, and then my heart;  
I took, without more thinking, in good part  
Time's gentle admonition,  
Who did so sweetly death's sad taste convey,  
Making my mind to smell my fatal day,  
Yet sugaring the suspicion.

'Farewell, dear flowers! sweetly your time ye spent!  
Fit, while ye lived, for smell or ornament,  
And, after death, for cures ;  
I follow straight, without complaints or grief,  
Since, if my scent be good, I care not if  
It be as short as yours!"

As a specimen of Herbert's more fantastic mood in dealing with his holy themes, I may cite the little poem entitled "Peace:"—

"Sweet Peace, where dost thou dwell? I humbly crave  
Let me once know.  
I sought thee in a secret cave,  
And asked if Peace were there.  
A hollow wind did seem to answer, 'No ;  
Go seek elsewhere

"I did ; and, going, did a rainbow note :  
'Surely,' thought I,  
'This is the lace of Peace's coat :  
I will search out the matter.'  
But, while I looked, the clouds immediately  
Did break and scatter.

“Then went I to a garden, and did spy  
A gallant flower,—  
The crown imperial. ‘Sure,’ said I,  
‘Peace at the root must dwell.’  
But, when I digged, I saw a worm devour  
What showed so well.

“At length I met a reverend, good old man,  
Whom, when for Peace  
I did demand, he thus began :—  
‘There was a prince of old  
At Salem dwelt, who lived with good increase  
Of flock and fold.

“‘He sweetly lived ; yet sweetness did not save  
His life from foes.  
But, after death, out of his grave  
There sprang twelve stalks of wheat,  
Which, many wondering at, got some of those  
To plant and set.

“‘It prospered strangely, and did soon disperse  
Through all the earth ;  
For they that taste it do rehearse  
That virtue lies therein,—  
A secret virtue, bringing peace and mirth  
By flight of sin.

“‘Take of this grain which in my garden grows,  
And grow for you.  
Make bread of it ; and that repose  
And peace, which everywhere  
With so much earnestness you do pursue,  
Is only there.’”

That Herbert's poetry has many of the characteristics of the metaphysical poetry of Donne and Cowley cannot be denied, but redeemed by the fervent spirit of devotion

breathing in every line. It is not the expression of a well-disciplined imagination, but is rather instinct with fancy. With all its peculiarities,—to use a kinder term than faults,—I had rather take it as it is, as one of the many tones of English poetry, than that its distinctive features should have been done away by stricter poetic discipline. It is curious to observe that Herbert has himself alluded to his participation in the over-wrought fashion of poetry, in a few lines which indicate its faults better, I think, than criticism has ever done, and close, too, with a statement of the best and universal theory of poetic art,—loyalty to nature in her own simplicity:—

“When first my lines of heavenly joys made mention,  
Such was their lustre,—they did so excel,—  
That I sought out quaint words and trim invention.  
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,  
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,  
Decking the sense as if it were to sell.

“Thousands of notions in my brain did run,  
Offering their service if I were not sped.  
I often blotted what I had begun :  
This was not quick enough, and that was dead.  
Nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sun,  
Much less those joys which trample on his head.

“As flames do work and wind, when they ascend,  
So did I weave myself into the sense ;  
But, while I bustled, I might hear a friend  
Whisper, ‘How wide is all this long pretence?  
There is in love a sweetness ready penned ;  
Copy out only that, and save expense.’”

Herbert is one of the many minor poets to whom we are indebted for the sacred poetry of the seventeenth

century, which is so voluminous that it has been truly said a history of it might be regarded as an elaborate preface to the "Paradise Lost."

Passing from the serious to the light poetry of the seventeenth century, we meet with strains as light in their movement as fancy ever danced to. Even in the songs, however, of that period there is a vein of reflection showing thoughtfulness in the midst of sportiveness, as in the first stanzas of that light lyric of Herrick's :—

"Gather the rose-buds while ye may;  
Old Time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles to-day  
To-morrow may be dying.

"The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,  
The higher he's a-getting  
The sooner will his race be run  
And nearer he's to setting."

It was to this poet, Robert Herrick, that English verse owes some of its most graceful and musical metrical arrangements. The music of the sweetest of Moore's melodies does not, it sounds to me, surpass the modulation of the verses entitled "The Night Piece :"—

"Her eyes the glowworm lend thee;  
The shooting stars attend thee;  
And the elves also,  
Whose little eyes glow  
Like the sparks of fires, befriend thee.

"No will-of-the-wisp mislight thee;  
Nor snake or slow-worm bite thee;  
But on thy way  
Not making a stay,  
Since ghost there is none to affright thee.



“Let not the dark thee cumber;  
What tho’ the moon doth slumber?  
The stars of the night  
Will lend thee their light,  
Like tapers clear without number.

“Then, Julia, let me woo thee,  
Thus, thus to come unto me;  
And, when I shall meet  
Thy silvery feet,  
My soul I’ll pour into thee.”

It seems to have been Herrick’s pleasure to try the sound of a great variety of rhythms, to find what music the language was capable of. The musical close of the following lines is the result of one of these experiments:—

“Am I despised because you say,  
And I dare swear, that I am grey?  
Know, lady, you have but your day;  
And time shall come when you shall wear  
Such frost and snow upon your hair.  
And when (tho’ long it comes to pass)  
You question with your looking-glass,  
And in that sincere crystal seek  
But find no rose-bud in your cheek,  
Nor any bed to give the show  
Where such a rare carnation grew,—  
Ah! then, too late, close in your chamber keeping,  
It will be told  
That you are old,  
By those true tears you’re weeping!”

Of Herrick’s sacred poems the most admired is his “Litany to the Holy Spirit,” of which the best stanzas are perhaps these:—

“In the hour of my distresse,  
 When temptations me oppresse,  
 And when I my sins confesse,  
                     Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

When I lie within my bed,  
 Sick in heart and sick in head,  
 And with doubts discomforted,  
                     Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

\*            \*            \*            \*

When the house doth sigh and weep,  
 And the world is drowned in sleep,  
 Yet mine eyes the watch do keep,  
                     Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

When the passing bell doth toll,  
 And the furies, in a shoal,  
 Come to fright a parting soul,  
                     Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

When the tapers now burn blue  
 And the comforters are few,  
 And that number more than true,  
                     Sweet Spirit, comfort me!

\*            \*            \*            \*

When the judgment is revealed,  
 And that opened which was sealed;  
 When to Thee I have appealed,  
                     Sweet Spirit, comfort me!”

In tracing the progress of English poetry and endeavouring to preserve some general reference to the course of English national history, though of necessity in a very loose way, I cannot pass by an era so memorable as the great civil war in the seventeenth century. The character of that period, its men and its events, is a theme of momentous interest if treated with reference to political and ecclesiastical considerations. Its literary interest is but small. The times were too troublous: the elements of society in wild commotion,—the feverish

anxiety of domestic war, with its protracted miseries,—all were adverse to activity in the cause of letters. There was not repose enough for the meditation which is needful for all good writing. Now, I have no wish to mingle views of politics with views of poetry, when they have little, if any thing, to do with each other. But there is a prevalent error touching the literature of those times, which ought to be noticed. I mean the habit of speaking of the Republican party in the civil war as the less poetical party. This is one of those prescriptive forms of speech which are handed from one author to another,—so habitually repeated that its truth is not questioned; and I have observed that it has blinded the most acute and accurate of the historians. When you come to reflect upon it, why, there is one single Republican name that will outweigh the royalist poets of the whole century. You may place in one scale the poetry of Milton, and in the other that of Cowley, the best poet of the other side, with all the effusions of every poet of kindred politics,—you may pile thereon all the antipathies and prejudices of Dr. Johnson,—and the beam of the balance will still scarcely be moved to recover its equipoise. But, while I notice such an opinion for the purpose of denying its truth, I feel, at the same time, that there is something low and unworthy in bringing poetry within the range of political partisanship. What has it to do with such things? And has it not, on the other hand, to do with a lofty enthusiasm in all its forms? If ever there was a strife in which high and pure principles and noble emotions were arrayed on *both* sides, it was that civil war. The general character of the struggle was, I believe, truly given in the words

of one of the greatest British statesmen and orators, when Lord Chatham said of it, "There was ambition; there was sedition; there was violence: but no man shall persuade me it was not the cause of liberty on one side and of tyranny on the other." On each side there were vices: on the one, fanaticism and hypocrisy, on the other, profligacy and voluptuousness; and, on both sides, violence and tyranny. But what gives that contest its glorious interest is that the ranks of each great party of the nation contained noble spirits, in whom were embodied, on the one side, the high-minded enthusiasm of a generous loyalty, and, on the other, the equally fervid enthusiasm of the love of freedom,—happy in its hopes and its short-lived enjoyment of republicanism.

"No sea

Swells like the bosom of a man set free!"

In contemplating that period, it should be with the large-hearted candour which can recognise and admire the strength and purity of these opposing principles, reverencing both the spotless integrity of a faithful cavalier like Derby, sealing his loyalty with his blood; and, on the other hand, the magnanimity of those who aspired to political freedom in the spirit of moral freedom,

"The later Sydney, Marvell, Harrington,

Young Vane, and others, who called Milton friend."

Now, when I come to the study of the poetry of that generation, I seek to know whether it may not be found in connection with those strong and generous passions which belonged to the best representatives of the times.

I need not stop to observe that the Puritan system and discipline were adverse—avowedly so—to poetic culture. It was vanity to their strict intellect,—a toy for the malignants. Nor need I more than state that, in the ephemeral poetry, (if the political songs and satires deserved the title of poetry,) the polished cavaliers knew how to play the game better than their stern opponents, the Roundheads. I would find some poetry more enduring than those occasional things, and in sympathy with the better heart which animated the worthy portion of each party. The search, pursued in this spirit, is not in vain; for it enables me to cite, in a few noble lines of Marvell, an admirable tribute to the serenity with which the king met his fate when his undaunted enemies struck the crown from his brow and then deliberately doomed the discrowned head of Charles Stuart to the block,—a bloody atonement, which should bring a charity for his errors and an admiration for the meek resignation of his last moments, such as inspires these lines, the composition of a staunch friend of the people,—the friend, too, of Milton,—telling how the royal actor was brought

“The tragic scaffold to adorn,  
While round the arméd bands  
Did clap their bloody hands.  
He nothing common did, or mean,  
Upon that memorable scene,  
But with his keener eye  
The axe’s edge did try;  
Nor call’d the gods, with vulgar spite,  
To vindicate his helpless right,  
But bowed his comely head  
Downe as upon a bed!”

There are two scarcely-known poets of this period, who, being equally zealous on opposite political sides, and encountering similar misfortunes in consequence of party reverses, present excellent types of the influence on poetic character of their various modes of thought and feeling. Richard Lovelace was a fine specimen of a gallant cavalier,—a soldier with a scholar's accomplishments. He risked his life and spent his whole patrimony in the hapless cause of his king. Among his poems are two songs, perhaps as happy efforts of the kind as any in the language. I can well credit the tradition of his virtue, his modesty, his chivalrous courtesy and courage, when I reflect on the sentiment at the close of the lines I am about to repeat; for there is in it a world of the morality of love's philosophy,—two or three words of wisdom which every lover should make his maxim. It was composed when he was going to the wars, and reconciles, with equal truth and grace of feeling, the soldier's and the lover's duty:—

“Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind,  
That, from the nunnery  
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind,  
To war and arms I fly.

“True, a new mistress now I chase,—  
The first foe in the field;  
And with a stronger faith embrace  
A sword, a horse, a shield.

“Yet this inconstancy is such  
As you too shall adore:  
*I could not love thee, dear, so much,  
Loved I not honour more.”*

This soldier's services in the cause of the monarchy

cost him not only his fortune, but his liberty. He was cast by the parliamentary party into prison ; but his unbroken spirit found utterance in his most famous song :—  
“To Althea, from prison,”—a strain perfectly characteristic of the cavalier-feeling,—a high-toned loyalty and gallantry and gayety :—

“When Love, with unconfined wings,  
Hovers within my gates,  
And my divine Althea brings  
To whisper at the grates,—  
When I lie tangled in her hair  
And fettered to her eye,—  
The birds that wanton in the air  
Know no such liberty.

“When flowing cups run swiftly round,  
With no allaying Thames,—  
Our careless heads with roses bound,  
Our hearts with loyal flames,—  
When thirsty grief in wine we steep,—  
When health and draughts go free,—  
Fishes that tipple in the deep  
Know no such liberty.

“When, like committed linnets, I,  
With shriller throat, shall sing  
The sweetness, mercy, majesty,  
And glories of my king,—  
When I shall voice aloud how good  
He is,—how great should be,—  
Enlarged winds, that curl the flood,  
Know no such liberty.

“Stone walls do not a prison make,  
Nor iron bars a cage ;  
Minds innocent and quiet take  
That for a hermitage.

If I have freedom in my love  
And in my soul am free,  
Angels alone, that soar above,  
Enjoy such liberty."

By the side of the memory of Lovelace let me briefly place that of a poet with as stout a heart, but pledged to the opposite side in the civil wars,—“honest George Wither,” the author of so many pieces that literary antiquaries have scarce been able to gather them from their obscurity. The homeliness of his versification places his poetry often below the smooth flow of Lovelace’s lyrics; but the gallantry of the cavalier could not produce strains of more fervid chivalry in praise of female loveliness. The sentiment was never more feelingly and fancifully expressed than when, for instance, in part of a long-sustained strain, he exclaims,—

“Stars, indeed, fair creatures be;  
Yet, amongst us, where is he  
Joys not more the while he lies  
Sunning in his mistress’ eyes,  
Than in all the glimmering light  
Of a starry winter night?”

His long life was spent in a perpetual mood of poetical exaltation. He was forever writing his verses, always after a fashion of his own and under most unpropitious circumstances. His days were full alternately of action and suffering: one while commanding a troop of horse in the service of the Parliament; again, twice deliberately abiding in London to witness the terrors of the plague, or braving the penalties of the law; fined and imprisoned over and over again in the Tower, the Marshalsea, and Newgate; and yet keeping his heart whole



to the last. It has been well said of him that he was forever anticipating persecution and martyrdom, fingering the flames, as it were, to try how he could bear them. He was a man of strong and serviceable piety. In all the ecclesiastical feverishness of the times, he ever called himself a Catholic Christian, declaring his religion is not mumbling over thrice a day

“ A set of *Ave-Marias*, or of creeds  
Or many hours formally to pray,  
When from a dull devotion it proceeds ;  
Nor is it up and down the land to seek  
To find those well-breathed lecturers that can  
Preach thrice a Sabbath and six times a week,  
Yet be as fresh as when they first began.”

At the age of seventy-three he was cast into prison. I have shown how the engaged spirit of a cavalier could sing. It will now be seen that Wither's Muse could utter, if not as melodious, a more thoughtful, strain :—

“ And is this Newgate, whereof so afraid  
Offenders are? Is this the dismal place  
Wherein, before I came, I heard it said  
There's nothing but grief, horror, and disgrace?  
I find it otherwise : and doubtless either  
It is belyed, or they who are sent hither  
Within themselves, when to this house they come,  
Bring that which makes it seem so troublesome.

“ I no worse here than where I was before  
Accommodated am ; for, though confined  
From some things, which concern my body more  
Than formerly, it hath enlarged my mind.”

The same indomitable spirit—a magnanimous self-sufficiency—is expressed in the lines,—

"My mind's my kingdom; and I will permit  
No other's will to have the rule of it;  
For I am free, and no man's power I know  
Did make me thus, nor shall unmake me now:  
But, through a spirit none can quench in me,  
This mind I got, and this my mind shall be."

When beggared by his calamities, he consoles himself on the loss of property with a reflection which he expresses with a fine poetic simile:—

"I with my losses [am] so well content  
As is a Christian, when, by Turks pursued  
Who overpower him by their multitude,  
He wrecks his vessel on a friendly shore,  
Where he hath life and freedom, though no more."

The voyage of George Wither's life was indeed on a stormy sea. According to the sailor's superstition, the winds were forever coming at his whistling. But in the worst of the storm it was always in his power to bring his tempest-tost bark to ride at anchor,—the anchorage of Christian hopefulness. His poetic studies, too, were an unceasing delight to him;—not a sentimental luxury, weakening his energy or his fortitude, but giving renewed strength to his stout heart. Earnestly has he told how his spirit was ever thus invigorated, in lines containing a simple but as strong a statement of a student's intellectual and moral resources—the sun-shine of an imaginative heart—as ever was penned:—

"They cause me to be fearless of my foes;  
When I am vexed, my spirits they compose;  
When I am poor, they are in stead of wealth;  
When I am sick, they help repair my health;  
When I am well, they are my recreation,  
When tempted to despair, hope's reparation:

Thereby, when sadness comes, to mirth I turn it;  
When I am slighted, they do make me scorn it.  
In prisons when my body is confined,  
They do so many ways enlarge my mind,  
That, doubting whether will for me prove best,—  
The freedom lost or that which is possest,—  
I use the means of both; but wholly leave  
The choice to God; and what he gives, receive.  
They are companions when I'm left alone;  
They find me work to do when I have none;  
By day me from ill company they keep,  
Make nights less tedious when I cannot sleep.  
They ease me when I am oppress'd with wrongs;  
When I want music, they do make me songs."

This literary gratefulness rises on a higher strain in his address to his Muse:—

"She's my mind's companion still,  
Spite of Envy's evil will;  
She doth tell me where to borrow  
Comfort in the midst of sorrow;  
Makes the desolatest place  
To her presence be a grace,  
And the blackest discontents  
To be pleasing ornaments.  
In my former days of bliss,  
Her divine skill taught me this:—  
That from every thing I saw  
I could some invention draw,  
And raise pleasure to her height,  
Through the meanest object's sight;  
By the murmur of a spring,  
Or the least bough rustleing,—  
By a daisy whose leaves spread  
Shut when Titan goes to bed,—  
Or a shady bush or tree,—  
She could more infuse in me  
Than all nature's beauties can  
In some other wiser man."

It is passages like these, recognising the resources of a chastened imagination and the influence of true poetry upon individual happiness, that have won for George Wither, neglected as his memory has been, a fine tribute, which, in closing this lecture, I desire to leave in your thoughts :—"The praises of poetry have been often sung in ancient and modern times; strange powers have been ascribed to it of influence over animate and inanimate auditors; its force over fascinated crowds has been acknowledged; but before Wither no one ever celebrated its power at home, the wealth and the strength which this divine gift confers upon its possessor. Fame—and that, too, after death,—was all which hitherto the poets had promised themselves from their art. It seems to have been left to (George) Wither to discover that poetry was a present possession as well as a rich reversion, and that the Muse had promise of both lives,—of this and of that which is to come."

## LECTURE VIII.

### The Age of the Restoration: Dryden.

Ambiguities in the general titles adopted to designate particular literary eras—The last quarter of the seventeenth century the age of Dryden—The degraded tastes of his times—The alliance of high poetry with virtue—The true standard of poetic merit—Dryden's poetry a reflection of the times of Charles II.—Profligacy of that age—Character of Charles Stuart—The spirit of Poetry is a spirit of enthusiasm—The debasing effects of the Civil Wars—Shaftesbury as Lord-Chancellor—Reception of the *Paradise Lost*—Winstanley's *Lives of the English Poets*—Milton's exposition of kingly duty—The Drama during the Age of the Restoration—Dryden's Plays—Defects of rhyming Tragedies—"The Fall of Innocence"—Dryden's alteration of "*The Tempest*"—"Absalom and Achitophel"—Buckingham—Literary larceny—Sir Egerton Brydges's *Lines on Milton*—"The Hind and the Panther"—"Alexander's Feast"—Ode for St. Cecilia's Day—Dryden's later poetry.

IN studying the literature of a nation it is necessary to bear in mind that general titles adopted to designate particular eras will almost inevitably be liable to ambiguities, which are calculated to suggest, imperceptibly, erroneous impressions. The employment of the title of the sovereign, as is usual, in marking the periods of English literature, is manifestly attended with this confusion:—that the reign may not be found to correspond, as to time, with the age in which the writers flourished. For instance, the literary age of Queen Elizabeth is not the

political reign of Queen Elizabeth; for half of the reign was spent before the glory of its poetry was developed. Again: if we employ the name of the most illustrious author to indicate a period of literary history, the mind unconsciously adopts an opinion which may be greatly erroneous:—that his fame had gained in his own times, the influence and authority it has received only from posterity. In this respect, there would be an absurdity were we to speak of “the age of Milton,” or even of Shakespeare; for many years rolled over the graves of each of those poets before the might of their genius was realized. Especially may this be said with regard to Milton, between whom and the spirit of the times in which his great poem was published there was so great an uncongeniality that, to refer the favourite poets of those days, with all their poetical heresies, their low morality, and their sins against the laws of pure and disciplined imagination, to the age of Milton, would be an incongruity as flagrant as the Roman usage of dating the age of their casks of wine by a reference to the date of the magistracy of a consul,—a cask of Falernian stamped with a name, perhaps, as stern as Caius Marius.

The period I am about entering upon in this lecture forms a striking exception to these remarks; for, if we seek a title to designate the last quarter of the seventeenth century, there need not be a moment’s hesitation in appropriating to it the name of Dryden. From the year 1674, when the death of Milton took place, down to the year 1700,—the date of Dryden’s death,—Dryden held in English poetry an absolute and exclusive supremacy. He and the age were suited to each other. He was the fit representative of the times of Charles II. With ta-

lents which might, by moral chastening and intellectual discipline, have secured to him a pure fame, he prostituted the poet's sacred endowment to unholy and base purposes. Now, this is lamentable. It would be so in the annals of the poetry of any people; but in those of English poetry it is doubly, deeply deplorable. Think for a moment of the mighty minds I have been contemplating in the previous lectures,—mighty, I mean, in their purity as well as in their power, indeed, their purity was part of their power; think of Spenser's spotless spirit, knowing no debasement in years either of prosperity or adversity; of Shakspeare's gentle and gigantic genius, uncontaminated even by the courses into which his life was cast; and of Milton, with all his partisanship in a fierce warfare, still keeping his imagination insphered in regions of serene air,—

“Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot  
Which men call earth.”

What mortal monarch seated on earthly throne, though, like Satan's throne in Pandemonium, it

“Outshone the wealth of Ormus and of Ind,  
Or where the gorgeous East, with richest hand,  
Showers on her kings barbaric pearl and gold,”—

What king, I say, could, either by kingly power or by kingly frown, have extorted from John Milton a single line profaning the sacred trust of his precious talent, held “ever in his great Taskmaster's eye”? Remember how, as we have been considering one great name after another on the register of England's mighty poets, we have thus far found the genius of all of them enlisted in the cause

of virtue, militant on the side of truth, nobly fulfilling their destiny, and leaving behind them undying words which wing their flight over each generation as it rises and passes away; so that we, I hope, may have caught some enthusiasm from their sound, centuries after those words were first uttered:—

“Blessings be with them, and eternal praise,  
Who gave us nobler loves and nobler cares,—  
The poets who, on earth, have made us heirs  
Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays.”

This benediction is not due to all, however rightfully they may claim the title of poet. There is one principle I shall cling to at every part of these lectures, because I am deeply convinced of its truth, and because, too, the annals of English poetry will sustain me in it:—that one inseparable attribute of all the highest poetry is alliance with virtue; that its tendency, mute though it be to the sensual and the dark, is to make the wise and the good still wiser, still better, still happier. Has it not been so, even after making full allowance for all violations of propriety in less refined states of society, with every one of the great poets we have been considering? Let their pure, imaginative morality be remembered, both because I do not wish to lead you unadvised into a different poetic atmosphere, and because, before this course is closed, I must apply this principle to other eminent names besides that of Dryden.

I am anxious to render justice to Dryden's powers, and shall strive to do so. Neither do I wish to limit literary research or taste to the productions of the *great masters*; for English poetry abounds with poems of unnumbered degrees of merit: its secondary poetry is rich;



so is its minor poetry; and even from the poetry of writers whose names are unknown to fame, as fragrant an anthology could be culled as in the literature of any language. But when I hear people talk of the poets carelessly or ignorantly, or, it may be, intentionally, coupling in an indiscriminate series Spenser, Milton, Dryden, and Pope, every principle of judgment and feeling and taste revolts. When taking Milton's standard, and acknowledging for the *greatest* poetry only that which is full of religious, of glorious and magnificent uses, and then looking at the uses to which Dryden debased his imagination, the question as to his poetic rank becomes simply a question how can this corruption put on the incorruption of a great poet's glory. In the course of these lectures I have had occasion to remark the influence exercised on the genius of the poets by the spirit of the times they lived in, but never finding that influence acquiring an ascendancy over their innate powers. Passing events seemed to float over their lives, as on a sunny day the shadow of a floating cloud is seen to speed over the surface of the fields, giving, indeed, different hues and tints, but not changing native and unalterable colours. Whatever adaptation the great poets made to their respective times, they ever kept that independence which gives to genius its home amid many generations. With Dryden a different relation began; for he sought a habitation steaming with a thousand vices, and there he dwelt till his garland and singing-robes were polluted by the contagion. Throughout Dryden's poems may be traced, in a distinct reflection, the character of the times of Charles II.; and each should, therefore, be examined by the literary or historical stu-

dent, for they are reciprocally illustrative. The temper of that time is stamped upon its literature. The poets, instead of their high office of "allaying the perturbations of the mind and setting the affections in right tune," had no worthier charge than to pamper the low passions of a worthless and adulterate generation. There probably never was a period of literature when it was more affected by extrinsic agencies than that now under review,—the age of the second Charles. Let us look, therefore, for a moment or two, at its characteristics.

Memory may run over the whole period of more than two thousand years,—the life of our British ancestry,—and not find any portion of it so loathsome as those twenty years during which Charles Stuart the younger was restored to the throne of his fathers.

Happier would it have been for any one having a man's heart within his breast to live in the barbaric age of British *paganism*, with all its ferocity, and the terrors of a hideous superstition,—when, in Cowper's fine lines,—

"The Druids struck the well-strung harps they bore,  
With fingers deeply dyed in *human* gore;  
And, while the victim slowly bled to death,  
Upon the tolling chords rung out his dying breath;"—

Better to have lived amid the wild consternation of the fiercest of England's invasions or the bloodiest of its civil wars,—better in the dismay of Mary's martyrdoms, or beneath the iron rod of Cromwell's military usurpation,—than to have pined heartsick at the sight of all the debasing profligacy which burst upon England at the time of the Restoration. When Cowley, with the fervour of royalty upon him, gave vent to his indignation at the Protector's dynasty, it was in a strain which would have

better fitted the lips of a generous Briton chafing under the abominations of his country,—its hereditary monarch restored :—

“Come the eleventh plague rather this should be;  
Come sink us rather in the sea;  
Come rather pestilence and reap us down;  
Come God’s sword, rather than our own.  
Let rather Roman come again,  
Or Saxon, Norman, or the Dane.  
In all the bonds we ever bore,  
We grieved, we sighed, we wept; *we never blushed before.*”

Upon Charles Stuart the lesson of adversity was wasted. After a childhood and youth pampered with the perilous luxury that attends the footsteps of an heir to royalty, the full cup of his confident hopes was dashed from his lips, when calamities undreamed of were poured down upon the royal household. The only occasion when he showed a manly spirit—when, backed by Scottish courage, he staked his fortunes on the field of battle to gain the throne of his fathers—had been preceded by an act of perjured hypocrisy; for, kneeling on the spot where his royal Scottish ancestors had sworn their coronation-oath, he called God to witness his plighted faith to a covenant he both detested and despised. The mailed hand of Cromwell was still the hand of victory; and the defeat at Worcester left the young king an outcast and a fugitive, sheltered only by the indomitable loyalty of his adherents, whose devotion he had no heart to be grateful for, for he prized it at no dearer rate than the trunk of the oak which once hid him from his pursuers. He fled to France, abandoning himself to effeminate, vulgar and vicious pleasures. Unhappily, the British blood that flowed in his veins was

mingled with the blood of one of those licentious monarchs who had soiled the purity of the French monarchy: it will be remembered he was the grandson of Henry IV.

Let it not be thought that I am wandering from my subject. I seek to show that if the spirit of a nation goes down, its poetry, if suffered to sympathize with the causes of its degradation, will go down with it. In the spirit of those times, and of Charles II. as representing it, I can find ample explanation of the sinking of English poetry. Every pure and noble sentiment, every generous emotion, every lofty thought, became a jest. Now, these are the life of poetry, which in its best forms can breathe only in an atmosphere of purity; and whenever such cannot be found it is the chief duty of poetry to create it,—to ventilate, as it were, a stagnant and corrupted air. The spirit of poetry—and, let me add, too, the love of it—is a spirit of enthusiasm. Amid the wide-spread corruption, the writings of a few poets and not a few of the clergy show that all hearts were not defiled; and that brazen age was well described by one of its divines, when he said, “To fight against religion by scoffing is the game the devil seems to be playing in the present age. He hath tryed the power and rage of the mighty and the wit and knowledge of the learned, but these have not succeeded for the destruction of religion; and therefore now he is making an experiment by another sort of enemies, and sets the apes and drollers upon it. And certainly there was never any other age in which sacred things have been so rudely and impudently assaulted by the profane abuses of jesters and buffoons, who have been the contempt of all wise times, but are the darlings and wits of these.”

The severe discipline of Puritan morality once removed, there came quickly in its stead a lawlessness whose pride was its freedom from all restraint. Immorality was a thing men boasted of; they took a party-pride in vice. The civil wars had also demoralized the people, by breaking up the habits and regularity of domestic life. Households were destroyed, and their proprietors found a residence in taverns; and, when the causes of such disordered life had passed away, the low habits it had engendered were left behind. Often, beggared by the wars, the sufferers were driven, in the words of as gallant a cavalier as Lovelace, "to steep their thirsty grief in wine." During the Middle Ages, the miseries that followed in the train of war had been famine and pestilence; but after the civil wars in England came debauchery, licentiousness, riot, and blasphemy. To such a condition of public feeling the only poetry that could be welcome was that prostituted form of it which delights in loose lays or bacchanalian orgies. The intellectual tastes of Charles II. have been historically recorded, and are typical of his times. Mentally, he was by no means deficient, but, on the contrary, possessed of much quickness of mind. Quotations from *Hudibras*, with all the indecencies of its wit, were often on his lips; the bombastic tragedies and the obscene comedies of the Restoration were congenial to him, and doubtless, too, the songs of Sedley and Rochester. There was another taste of the monarch, illustrative also of the downward course of the spirit of the age,—a sort of zeal for material science, prosecuted to the exclusion of all spirituality. The king had his private laboratory, where he carried on experiments as far removed from a true love of science as the filthy chemistry

in the cauldrons of the witches in "Macbeth." Charles II. was a materialist in the grossest sense of the word:—

"One all eyes  
Philosopher! a fingering slave;  
One that would peep and botanize  
Upon his mother's grave!"

It has been his good luck, however, to gain the epithet of the "*merry monarch*;" and thus has many a one been led to think that good-nature and a sportive temper, an amiable playfulness, were his attributes. The sport he made was with things he ought to have held in reverence; and he played with honour and justice, with womanly virtue and all noble emotions. We often forget, in laughing at the frolics of the king or his courtiers, how dangerous were their jests. When one of the most profligate of his adherents was raised most unworthily to a high station, judicial dignity was made sport with, and the people taught to ridicule what they should have stood in awe of. A contemporary historian thus tells of one of these adventures. When Lord-Chancellor Shaftesbury ordered his procession to Westminster Hall on the first-day of term, "his lordship had an early fancy or freak, the day, (when all the officers of the law, king's counsel, and judges, used to wait upon the great seal to Westminster Hall,) to make this procession on horseback, as in old time the way was, when coaches were not so rife; and accordingly the judges, &c. were spoken to, to get horses, as they and all the rest did, by borrowing and hiring, and so equipped themselves with black footcloths in the best manner they could: and divers of the nobility, as usual, in compliance and honour to a new Lord-Chancellor, attended also in their equipments. Upon notice in town

of this cavalcade all the shew-company took their places at windows and balconies, with the foot-guard in the streets, to partake of the fine sight; and, being once well-settled for the march, it moved, as the design was, *statelily* along. But when they came to straights and interruptions, for want of gravity in the beasts, and too much in the riders, there happened some curvetting which made no little disorder. Judge Twisden, to his great affright and the consternation of his grave brethren, was laid along in the dirt; but all at length arrived safe, without loss of life or limb in the service. This accident was enough to divert the like frolic for the future; and the very next term they fell to their coaches as before."

This certainly must have been a comical spectacle. The grave dignitaries of the bench, deprived of their long-enjoyed security of rolling along in their huge, lumbering coaches of state, and unexpectedly ordered on this cavalry-service; the steeds, fretted by the timid and awkward horsemanship of men whose skill lay in other subjects, and judicial authority, of but little avail in their procession, and soon converted into judicial consternation when poor Judge Twisden was unhorsed at full length in the mire of a London street. But, setting aside the ludicrousness of the mishap of this judicial cavalcade, it was a frolic which could hardly have been ventured on except by a chancellor of such a monarch. It was a piece of reckless frivolity worthy alike of Shaftesbury and of Charles,—men to whose unbridled humours profligacy was a jest. "Shaftesbury," said the king, on one occasion, "thou art the wickedest dog in England." "May it please your majesty," replied the statesman, dutifully yielding the post of honor, "of a *subject*, I believe I am."

Let me ask, What hope could there be for poetry to escape the gibe and the jest in an age when authority in high places could thus make the ermine "a motley to the view"? The temper more adverse than any other to poetry is the predominance of unchastened ridicule; for the simple reason that it is a temper at variance with all that is sublime or graceful in humanity. If the poet cannot wing his flight above the reach of parodies and satirical jests and all the light archery of ridicule, his region must be a low and impure one, in which the fire of the best poetry cannot be sustained.

A literary question, affecting the character of the times I am now speaking of, has been discussed by several writers, by whom different opinions are entertained respecting the reception of Milton's "Paradise Lost." The fact of thirteen hundred copies having been sold in two years, (entitling the author, I may mention in passing, to a second payment of five pounds,) and of three thousand copies being sold in eleven years, has been much relied on to prove that the slowness of Milton's advance to the glory of his earthly fame has been exaggerated. This is no proof of his contemporaries having done justice to the poem, nor does it sanction the conclusion of the poet's having attained any thing like what may be called popularity, which was then under a dominion, in the jurisdiction of taste, which could not by any possibility have recognised the high and chaste splendour of Milton's imagination. It has been well asked and answered, Who were the readers and the buyers of the "Paradise Lost"? They were the small number of Milton's friends and the liberal lovers of true poetry, who are *many*, though *not the many*:



—young men eager to admire, who found a new power created within them by the influence of that mighty orb of song; and old men that felt their youth restored in all its energy, but with none of its turbulence, by that divine harmony. But these were readers whose influence on public opinion must have been inappreciably small in their generation. The dissolute monarch and some equally dissolute nobles were for a time the literary dictators. As to influence from other quarters, it has been well though strongly said that the classical Republicans were few and inefficient; the Puritans would not read poetry; the High-Church bigots would read nothing but what emanated from their own party; the commonplace, roystering Royalists were seldom sober enough to read, and the mob-fanatics did not know their letters.

But I desire no better proof to show how unheeded were Milton's inspirations by the common mind of those times than a fine passage closing one of the books of "Paradise Regained." A literary censorship was part of the machinery of the monarchy; and, when in some tragedy or other there was a plot which chanced to be typical of Charles II.'s profligacy, the hand of the censor was placed upon it, not because there was danger that the representation might, like Hamlet's play, catch the *conscience* of the king, or, in Shakspeare's phrase, "make mad the guilty and appall the free," but because the people, in their familiar intercourse with the drama, might have quickly and offensively applied the play to their own sovereign. Now, the passage I am about to cite from Milton could have passed uncensored only because overlooked as innocent from the anticipated

neglect of the poem in an unworthy age. It is a noble exposition of kingly duty,—the office of a king set forth with a sublime morality by a republican,—a placid admonition, full at the same time of the deepest implied rebuke to one like him under whose sway it was written :—

“A crown,  
Golden in show, is but a wreath of thorns;  
Brings dangers, troubles, cares, and sleepless nights  
To him who wears the regal diadem  
When on his shoulders each man's burden lies.  
For therein stands the office of a king,  
His honour, virtue, merit, and chief praise,  
That for the public all this weight he bears.  
Yet he who reigns within himself, and rules  
Passions, desires, and fears, is more a king;  
Which every wise and virtuous man attains;  
And who attains not, ill aspires to rule  
Cities of men, or headstrong multitudes,  
Subject himself to anarchy within,  
Or lawless passions in him, which he serves.  
But to guide nations in the way of truth  
By saving doctrine, and from error lead  
To know, and, knowing, worship God aright,  
Is yet more kingly. This attracts the soul,  
Governs the inner man, the nobler part;  
That other o'er the body only reigns,  
And oft by force; which, to a generous mind,  
So reigning, can be no sincere delight.”

Dryden's career of authorship began some years before the publication of Milton's great poems. One of his early pieces was his heroic stanzas on the death of Cromwell; and, when the Restoration took place, he veered quickly round, and was ready with a congratulatory poem on the happy return of His Sacred Majesty Charles II. and a panegyric for the coronation-day.

When, after the austere years of the commonwealth, poetical composition began to be again cultivated, it resumed the form of the metaphysical poetry of the preceding years, resembling—to borrow Sir Walter Scott's clever simile—those who, after a long mourning, resume for a time their ordinary dresses, of which the fashion has in the mean time passed away. But it was only a short-continued revival. A new fashion of taste was coming instead of the harsh and scholastic form which had been so laboriously cultivated.

One immediate consequence of the Restoration was the opening of the theatres and the attendant renewal of dramatic literature. It was not, however, the renewal of the old drama,—the drama of Shakspeare and his strong contemporaries. That was too massy for a frivolous generation. Besides, Charles II. came back to his native land with tastes as corrupt as his morals. The French drama had grown familiar and pleasing to his ear; and, however it may have suited the region of France, it never was meant to be domesticated in England.

The literature of every language has its distinctive and proper characteristics; and, whenever any attempt is made to disguise them in a foreign dress, injury is inevitably done by the metamorphosis. In this way the English drama was spoiled by the Gallican character that was given to it; and in a similar way, let me here add, would good prose writing be, were it possible for the intolerable attempt of a few living writers—one especially of considerable power, (Carlyle)—to Germanize English style, to receive a general sanction. The imported influence on the drama of England gave it a forced, unnatural, hyperbolical inflation, greatly contrasted with its true native power.

The stately march and the pompous diction which it was deemed proper for the French stage to assume in the august presence of Louis XIV. was to be acted over in the presence of his kinsman Charles II. The tragedies which this taste gave rise to were what were called the *heroic* plays. All the men were made to speak in the stately style of fanciful *heroes*, and all the women were to be veritable tragedy-queens. These dramas are also entitled, with reference to another trait, “the *rhyming* tragedies.” The blank verse, so admirably proved, in the earlier and incomparably better dramas, as suited to the expression of passion, was laid aside, and Dryden boldly vindicated the use of rhyme, the unceasing recurrence of identical sounds in the most monotonous form of rhyme,—the couplet,—as a step in advance of his great dramatic predecessors, and as carrying the drama another degree on towards perfection. Immediately after the Restoration, Dryden devoted his powers to the popular and patronized labour of manufacturing acting plays for the stage: he became a prolific playwright, producing more tragedies than I have been at the pains of counting. He wrote them by contract, the bargain stipulating the number, the time, and the compensation; and the result was, in most cases, very like what is, I believe, the usual character of contract-labour. But these plays of Dryden’s answered the author’s purpose: they were written to sell, and not to survive their temporary service. They were received in the green-room, acted, applauded, printed, and are forgotten. They may be revived, so far as a reprint in Dryden’s Complete Works, as edited by Sir Walter Scott, is a revival; but, for all that, they are dead beyond all chance—I will not say *hope*—of restoration.

Their only resuscitation is an occasional exhumation by some labourer in obsolete literature, bringing them to light again, like poor "Yorick's skull," the *king's jester*, full of dirt and jowled to the ground and knocked about the mazzard by a sexton's spade; and then these dead things of a once busy poet may be moralized over by some literary student in Hamlet's very words:—"Alas! poor Yorick!—a fellow of infinite jest and most excellent fancy: where be your jibes now? your gambols? your songs? the dust is earth."

It is not my intention to illustrate by quotation the bad taste and the wretched poetry of the heroic plays in which Dryden had so guilty a share; for, while I am relying greatly upon your indulgence in a course of lectures so comprehensive in its range as that I have ventured on, it would not be prudent to put your patience in jeopardy by imposing on you tasteless and uninteresting citations. Let me say that the whole theory of these productions was unsound; and I will endeavour to show it in a way which will at the same time give me the opportunity of introducing something in the way of incidental comment on Shakspeare. It will be remembered by every one, that in the tragedy of Hamlet there is introduced a little drama which is acted in the presence of the imaginary king and courtiers,—a play, therefore, within a play. It must have been observed too, by even careless readers of our great dramatist, without perhaps being aware of the reason for it, that the style of the play before the king is wholly different from the style of Shakspeare's own play. The secondary play, as I may call it, is in rhyme; the sentiments are in an exaggerated vein, and the language hyperbolical: how different from the primary

play, Shakspeare's own exquisite blank verse and his just tone of thought and feeling, as may readily be shown by placing a few lines of each in contrast! I select expressions of thought not altogether unlike:—

“Orderly to end, where I begun  
Our wills and fates do so contrary run  
That our devices still are overthrown;  
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own:  
So think thou wilt no second husband wed;  
But die thy thoughts, when thy first lord is dead.”

Now by the side of this observe a meditation of Shakspeare clothed in his appropriate diction:—

“Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,  
When our deep plots do pall; and that should teach us,  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.”

In this difference of style, both of thought and language, Shakspeare acted from a deep principle of art. If the play within the play had been expressed in his usual style, there would have been nothing to distinguish it. It was necessary to have a line of discrimination between the two; otherwise Hamlet and the dramatic interlude woven into the plot would have been very much the same thing. But how was this to be accomplished? In a way manifesting Shakspeare's perfect sense of the true philosophy of the drama as an imaginative imitation of life. The play to be acted at Hamlet's suggestion, to satisfy his doubts of the king's guilt, was, of course, one degree further removed from nature; and consequently a style proportionately removed from the ordinary speech of life was appropriated to it: a hyperbolical strain was needed to show its position beyond the

primary drama, it being an imitation within an imitation, and the most fastidious taste is thus unconsciously reconciled to its exaggerations. Now, in applying these principles to the heroic tragedies of Dryden, it is perceived that the author has gone directly to the exaggerations, without any of that necessity which is the explanation of Shakspeare's employment of such a style. The simple language of imagination was not stimulant enough for a vitiated taste. The bounds of nature, within which the genius of Shakspeare moved, were disdainfully overleaped; and the consequence was bombast and fustian and all extravagance.

After Dryden had wasted much of his strength on his rhyming tragedies, his opinions began to undergo a change, and, perhaps with a truer appreciation of Shakspeare, to perceive that the fashion he had so greatly encouraged was nothing more than a fashion. The prevalent dramatic style had been keenly satirized, in the famous parody, "The Rehearsal," by the witty and profligate Villiers, Duke of Buckingham,—Dryden being held up to chief ridicule in the prominent character of the dramatic author "Bayes." The sharp shaft pierced him, giving not a mortal but a poisoned wound; for Dryden reserved his vengeance for the weighty blow he dealt to Buckingham some years after in his celebrated political satire. When the rhyme was relinquished and blank verse adopted by Dryden, in his later tragedies, his tone rose with the change; and now and then a passage may be discovered of admirable poetic cast.

Before dismissing the dramatic part of Dryden's career of authorship, two of his productions should be mentioned, as singularly illustrative of the perverted taste of

the writer, and of those for whom he wrote. The first was his paraphrase of "Paradise Lost," which he translated into a rhyming play, in five acts, entitled "The Fall of Innocence:"—a work the merit of which may be conjectured from the plan of it, and, to my mind, conclusive that Dryden could not have had a just appreciation of the great epic poet. I know there is an expression of Dryden's often quoted to prove his admiration of Milton; but there is also enough to show that he considered himself on this occasion as refining the matchless poem he was tampering with, and as giving it a polish and grace it stood in need of. A still bolder venture was when, jointly with Davenant, he undertook to *improve* Shakspeare's exquisite play, "The Tempest," and gave it the altered form which is still listened to in the theatres, doubtless, by not a few, as the real original production. This abuse of another of his unapproachable predecessors was also accompanied by words of admiration; for in the prologue he used the lines frequently quoted,—

"Shakspeare's magic could not copied be:  
Within that circle none durst walk but he.

But the sincerity of these words is scarcely to be reconciled with the ill-judged work they are prefaced to, of which it has been well said that not only "not one additional beauty has been inserted, not one felicitous hint improved, but the profound skill and knowledge of nature, for which the original has been justly praised, has been lost sight of by the improvers, who have stripped the spiritual creation of Shakspeare of its sky-tinctured robes, and stifled the wild harmony of its notes, in order that



they might deck it in the artificial finery and bestow on it the conventional manners of their grosser times and their degraded theatre."

Sir Walter Scott has, with great truth, observed "how much the character and style of Shakspeare's and Dryden's dramas were influenced by the manners of the respective ages in which they lived and the different audiences they were addressed to. The poor, small theatres in which Shakspeare's and Jonson's plays were represented were filled with spectators who, though of the middle ranks, were probably worse educated than our more vulgar; but they came prepared with a tribute of tears and laughter to bursts of passion or effusions of wit, though incapable of estimating the beauties derived from the gradual development of a story, well-maintained characters, well-arranged incidents, and the minute beauties of language. Dryden, on the other hand, wrote what was to pass before the judgment of a monarch and his courtiers, professed judges of dramatic criticism, and a formidable band of town critics. Art, therefore, was not only a requisite qualification, but the principal attribute, of the dramatic poet. An exhibition of nature in the strength of her wildest energies, as in 'Lear' and 'Othello,'—deep emotion, or sweet and simple pathos,—would have found no correspondent feeling in the bosoms of the selfish, the witty, the affected, and the critical audiences who preferred the ingenious, romantic, and polished:" and, therefore, Scott reasonably questions whether the age of Charles II. would have borne the introduction of Othello or Falstaff.

The miserable vassalage of Dryden to the theatre at last began at once to irritate and depress him; for he

had a spirit which, if not elevated enough to save his talents from unworthy pursuits, did yet sooner or later awaken the painful sense of self-degradation. "I desire," said he, "to be no longer the Sisyphus of the stage,—to roll up a stone with endless labour, which, to follow the proverb, *gathers no moss*, and which is perpetually falling down again."

The ambition of an heroic poem was flitting across his mind. But from this he was called away to a different service; and it is vain to speculate what an epic poem from the pen of Dryden might have been. I can see little reason to regret that he was diverted from the attempt; for his imagination, with all its power in certain departments, was hardly capable of a long-sustained and requisite majesty. He was now to enlarge the domain of English poetry by the production of the most nervous political satire in the language. When the inquiry is made as to the ground of Dryden's poetical fame, he is found to be one of the poets whose reputation is not at once justified by a reference to any one *chief* production. It probably rests principally upon his great satire,—the poem of "Absalom and Achitophel." The reign of Charles II. was a reign of political intrigue,—an effect or one form of its corruption. It was a period of plot and cabal, busy with the present and still busier with the future,—the question of the succession. It would consume more time than is at my command to recall the state of things which Dryden took as the occasion of his poem. It was levelled against the scheme of Shaftesbury and his adherents to set aside the heir-presumptive to the throne and advance the interests of the king's natural son,—the unfortunate Duke of Monmouth. Poli-

tical lampoons and satires were no novelties in the ephemeral literature of England; but such a satire as Dryden's was an engine of destruction such as had not been known before. It was like some of the weapons which are revolutionizing modern warfare, contrasted with the bow and arrow or the clumsy matchlock musket of olden times. The satire of Dryden had the merit of striking high as well as strongly,—having, however, it should be added, the royal encouragement to sanction its boldness, and some against whom it was levelled having fallen from their high station. The poem gave its author opportunity for his long-reserved retribution upon one who had made the first assault,—the Duke of Buckingham,—the satire of “The Rehearsal” being now repaid in a few lines, into which was compressed sarcasm a hundredfold multiplied. The character of Zimri, in which he represented Buckingham, was considered by the author himself as the masterpiece of his satire, and his own comment is the best statement of the admirable adroitness of the attack:—“The character of Zimri, in my ‘Absalom,’ is, in my opinion, worth the whole poem. It is not bloody, but it is ridiculous enough; and he for whom it was intended was too witty to resent it as an injury. If I had railed, I might have suffered for it justly; but I managed my own work more happily, perhaps more dexterously. I avoided the mention of great crimes, and applied myself to the representing of blind sides and little extravagances, to which the wittier a man is he is generally the more obnoxious. It succeeded as I wished; the jest went round, and he was laughed at in his turn who began the frolic:—

“Some of their chiefs were princes of the land:  
In the first rank of these did Zimri stand;  
A man so various that he seemed to be  
Not one, but all mankind’s epitome:  
Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong;  
Was every thing by starts, and nothing long,  
But, in the course of one revolving moon,  
Was chemist, fiddler, statesman, and buffoon;  
Then all for women, painting, rhyming, drinking,  
Besides ten thousand freaks that died in thinking.  
Blest madman, who could every hour employ  
With something new to wish or to enjoy!  
Railing and praising were his usual themes,  
And both, to show his judgment, in extremes,  
So over-violent or over-civil,  
That every man with him was god or devil.  
In squandering wealth was his peculiar art  
Nothing went unrewarded but desert.  
Beggared by fools, whom still he found too late,  
He had his jest, and they had his estate;  
He laughed himself from court, then sought relief  
By forming parties, but could ne’er be chief.”

The finest skill of the satirist was shown in his choice of the vulnerable points of character. Buckingham was a cankered profligate, casehardened in sensuality, with every moral feeling literally dead; and, therefore, if the satire had consisted of invective of his immorality, or exposure of what was already notorious,—his debauchery and vice,—it would have trickled off like drops of water on an oiled surface; but, as it was, it struck him, indurated as he was, like a shower of molten lead. Dryden well knew how encased his adversary was in the armour of a moral torpor; but he detected the joints of that armour, and there found space to thrust with his keen sword a desperate wound.

The grasp of Dryden's satire seized on some of his luckless contemporaries in authorship,—his small rivals in poetry,—who have gained a sinister immortality, owing all their fame to the stamp he put upon them,—such as Shadwell and poor Settle, who have come down to posterity in these lines:—

“Doeg, though without knowing how or why,  
Made still a blundering kind of melody;  
Spurred boldly on, and dashed through thick and thin,  
Through sense and nonsense, never out nor in;  
Free from all meaning, whether good or bad,  
And, in one word, heroically mad.  
He was too warm on picking-work to dwell,  
But fagoted his notions as they fell,  
And, if they rhymed and rattled, all was well.”

I cannot here omit noticing that a very wretched condition of literary society existed in Dryden's time; for there was a multitude of writers, many of them mere scribblers and versifiers, full of pretensions and empty of every manly principle and generous feeling,—mean, mercenary, and stupid, forever on the alert to take unfair advantage of a fellow-labourer. When Dryden meditated an epic poem, he was carefully mysterious as to the intended subject of it; for what reason, do you suppose? Why, from the fear that it would be immediately seized and appropriated by some of the countless scribblers, and thus his design be forestalled by this curious species of literary larceny. How melancholy a contrast is this to that hearty and open-hearted intercourse which prevailed among the distinguished dramatic contemporaries of Shakspeare,—those frank and happy festivities at the Mermaid Tavern, the tradition of which

has been kept alive, and presents to our fancy the great dramatist, with Ben Jonson and Fletcher, Beaumont, Donne and Ford, and the rest, like a band of brothers. In Dryden's day there was envy and jealousy and malice, great and small,—each man's impulse selfishness. The time had nearly gone by for that amiable, fraternal feeling in literature,—the joint authorship,—such as carries the names of Beaumont and Fletcher inseparable and undistinguished to future generations.

In treating the powers of Dryden as a writer of satire, let me briefly notice what has occurred to me as a contrast with his illustrious predecessor, Milton. Like Dryden, Milton was involved in strife with men of the world and of letters, politicians and authors; he too had occasion for satire. But for that he deemed “the vision and the faculty divine” too sacred; and he poured forth his fierce denunciations and rebukes in *prose*. Bitter and sometimes coarse and vulgar words, which cannot but be deplored, broke from him, but never in his pure and majestic poetry. His muse was too sacred to be profaned by this world's angry and fleeting passions. It is only over the stormy temper of Milton's *prose* that one of his most enthusiastic admirers has lamented in a noble sonnet. The lines are from an ardent lover of genius,—himself a man of genius,—the late Sir Egerton Brydges:—

“Not Milton's holy genius could secure  
In life his name from insult and from scorn,  
And taunts of indignation, foul as fall  
Upon the vilest tribe of human kind!

Nor yet untainted could his heart endure  
The calumnies his patience should have borne;  
For words revengeful started at his call,  
And blotted the effulgence of his mind.  
But, oh! how frail the noblest soul of man  
Not o'er aggressive blame the bard arose;  
His monarch's deeds 'twas his with spleen to scan,  
And on his reign the gates of mercy close.  
He had a hero's courage; but, too stern,  
He could not soft submission's dictates learn.

I must hasten on from the satirical portion of Dryden's authorship, to notice, very briefly, some of his argumentative poems,—a species of poetry especially illustrating the two prime qualities of his poetry,—the power of reasoning in verse and a compressed vigour of style. Immediately after the accession of James II., when that prince's design of reconciling England to the Church of Rome became apparent, Dryden, at a time most suspicious for his sincerity, suddenly declared himself a convert to Popery, and gave to his new alliance the allegorical poem "The Hind and the Panther," the longest of his original poems. The fable is fanciful, perhaps somewhat fantastic, in the device of conveying an elaborate theological controversy, as some simple moral is inculcated in Esop's little parables. It has been remarked of Dryden that he reasoned better in verse than in prose. In this poem the reasoning is acute, with an intermixture of wit and the best flow of his versification. It is a statement, probably to their full advantage, of the arguments employed in favour of the infallibility of Romanism against an unsteady and ultra Protestantism. The hind, an immaculate and unoffending animal, was, to the fancy of the proselyte, a type

of the purity and gentleness of the Church of Rome ; the panther, a strong and beautiful but spotted beast, is the Church of England ; and various other beasts are representatives of different sects,—the *quaking* hare, for instance, being the type of that worthy Society in which the poet finds naught else to censure but their scruples as to war and oaths. But the associates of his early days, the Presbyterians, find less mercy at the poet's hands ; for their image "is a gaunt and hungry wolf, who pricks up his *predestinating* ears." While it is wiser, as well as more charitable, neither to condemn Dryden's adoption of Roman Catholic tenets for insincerity, nor to ascribe it to sordid motives, it should be understood that it was not a conversion from any previous well-settled creed, but the movement of a mind which as yet had taken little heed to its hereafter. He found himself growing old, many precious years misspent in worthless, thankless, and dangerous pursuits, in the service and in the society of the dissolute and unprincipled, making sport for them, and displaying his God-given strength in literary gladiatorship ; after a life busied in the thickest of the throng of a faithless generation, he began at last to have misgivings, and to feel, in the words of a truly moral poet who had gone before him,—

"That, unless above himself he can  
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man !"

He witnessed the ecclesiastical ferment of his times,—affairs of church entangled with affairs of state,—and his wearied and awakened spirit hastened from the apathy or restlessness of skepticism into the repose of absolute



ecclesiastical infallibility. The whole course of the argument, in the poem, shows this, even if it were not pretty clearly avowed :—

“My thoughtless youth was winged with vain desires ;  
 My manhood, long misled by wandering fires,  
 Followed false lights ; and when their glimpse was gone  
 My pride struck out new sparkles of its own.  
 Such was I, such by nature still I am ;  
 Be thine the glory, and be mine the shame !  
 Good life be now my task : my doubts are done.”

The opening lines of the “Hind and the Panther” have been reputed among the most musical in the language,—an opinion, however, entertained by those who have limited their sense of rhythm chiefly to the rhyme and the couplet :—

“A milk-white hind, immortal and unchanged,  
 Fed on the lawns and in the forest ranged ;  
 Without, unspotted, innocent within,  
 She feared no danger, for she knew no sin.  
 Yet had she oft been chased with horns and hounds,  
 And Scythian shafts ; and many wingéd wounds  
 Aimed at her heart ; was often forced to fly,  
 And doomed to death, though fated not to die.

\* \* \* \* \*

Panting and pensive, now she ranged alone  
 And wandered in the kingdoms once her own ;  
 The common hunt, though from their rage restrained  
 By sovereign power, her company disdained ;  
 Grinned as they passed, and with a glaring eye  
 Gave gloomy signs of secret enmity.  
 ’Tis true, she bounded by, and tripped so light,  
 They had not time to take a steady sight ;  
 For truth has such a face and such a mien  
 As, to be loved, needs only to be seen.”

With the high eulogies on Dryden's odes, especially "Alexander's Feast," I confess myself unable to sympathize. While there is much of lyrical rapidity in it, there is an absence of lyrical dignity both in thought and language: it has somewhat too much of the bacchanalian strain and too much of the pettiness of a mere song to come up to the standard of a true ode.

In the course of this lecture I have had occasion to condemn the perversion of Dryden's genius to low and unhallowed purposes. There was not only the native licentiousness in many of his dramas, but a borrowed iniquity in not a few of his translations from ancient authors. His imagination did not, like Milton's, travel into Greek and Roman poetry to feed on the purity and wisdom to be found there, but gloated over its corruptions and obscenity, as if it were better to go to the Eternal City and there to delve in the tombs or beneath the mouldering arches of its sewers than to stand on the Capitoline and breathe the pure air under an Italian sky and blowing across the seven hills of Rome.

It was my intention to have attempted to draw a contrast between the old age of Milton and Dryden, to each of them a season of solitude and worldly misfortune:—Milton's the noble, placid closing of a life spent "ever in his great Taskmaster's eye,"—the very darkness of blindness sanctified to his meditative spirit, as he sublimely imagined it, "the shadows of heavenly wings" falling upon his footsteps;—Dryden's old age the remnant of a life worn out in his Egyptian bondage, embittered by the memory of talents

spent in the thankless services of the meanest, most sordid and grovelling of earthly kings. This contrast was in my thoughts; but, when I reflect on the lines I now in conclusion read, I find myself disarmed of the intention :—

“If joys hereafter must be purchased here  
 With loss of all that mortals hold so dear,  
 Then welcome infamy and public shame,  
 And, last, a long farewell to worldly fame!  
 ’Tis said with ease; but oh, how hardly tried  
 By haughty souls to human honour tied!  
 Oh, sharp convulsive pangs of agonizing pride!  
 Down then, thou rebel, never more to rise!  
 And what thou didst, and dost, so dearly prize,—  
 That fame, that darling fame,—make that thy sacrifice;  
 ’Tis nothing thou hast given; then add thy tears  
 For a long race of unrepenting years:  
 ’Tis nothing yet, yet all thou hast to give;  
 Then add those may-be years thou hast to live:  
 ’Tis nothing still; then poor and naked come;  
 Thy Father will receive his unthrift home,  
 And thy blest Saviour’s blood discharge the mighty sum.”

## LECTURE IX.

### The Age of Queen Anne: Pope;

AND

Poets of the later part of the Eighteenth Century: Cowper.

The Age of Pope—Change in the social relations of Authors—Language of Dedications—Periodical publications—State of British parties—Lord Mahon's illustrations of the age—Spirit of that age—Alexander Pope—His aspirations—His want of sympathy with his predecessors—Imitation of French poetry—Pope's edition of Shakspeare—Pope's Pastorals—Corruptions of the English tongue—John Dennis's Emendations of Shakspeare—Pope's versification—The "Town"—The Moonlight Scene in the Iliad—Pope and Milton contrasted—"Eloisa to Abelard"—The "Rape of the Lock"—Pope's Satires—The "Essay on Criticism"—The "Essay on Man"—Lord Bolingbroke—Orthodoxy of the "Essay on Man"—His appreciation of Female Character—William Cowper—His insanity—"The Task"—"John Gilpin"—"The Dirge"—"The Castaway"—"Cowper's Grave."

THE lecture on Dryden has brought our studies down to the close of the seventeenth century, his death having its date in the year 1700. A literary era of great brilliancy soon followed in the early years of the eighteenth century,—the age of Queen Anne, as it has been styled,—of the poetry of which Pope stands, by universal admission, the representative—enjoying very

much the same exclusive supremacy as had been attained by his immediate predecessor, Dryden, in his days. The age has its distinctive traits, political, moral, and social, affecting its literature; and Pope lived in close and strong sympathy with the times. He was, though devoted to the prime pursuit of literary fame, intimately associated with the actors and the scenes of public life. His reputation was speedy and brilliant. The real worth of it has been much discussed within the last few years,—a discussion, however, in which, except with a few ultraists, there is less real difference of opinion than zeal of controversy.

Before entering upon any statement of these opinions, I wish to notice a change which, at this time, was taking place in the social relations of authors,—their position in the community. The condition of literature has in different moods of society, by this consideration, been materially controlled, taking a character from outward agencies. In the earlier ages of English authorship, the poets, when seeking the favour and countenance of men of rank, conciliated their patronage by tributes which were no less honourable to him that gave than to him who received; for the language of dedication was a manly language, wholly free from servility. What, for instance, could be finer than the magnificent series of dedications of Spenser's "Fairy Queen,"—the affectionate and dutiful homage of a heart—a true poet's heart—forever seeking the good and the honourable and the beautiful, wherever his imagination dwelt? The poet and the man of true nobility appear not to have been separated by any strongly-marked line of social demarcation: there was equal and honourable intimacy. Coming down to a

later period, writers are seen pitiably fawning upon the great, the rich, and the powerful; an adulation poisonous to the love of truth and independence becomes a deep-seated and wide-spread disease. The boundless extravagance of Dryden's flattery is one of the moral blots upon his memory. What was a poet's function, in that sensual generation, but to feed an impure and palsied taste, forever demanding stronger and stronger stimulants? His position had scarce more of moral elevation than that of a court buffoon, rising higher only when called to render a vassal's service in some fugitive quarrel of his master's, and to provide weapons from the arsenal of poetic satire. A better state of things was brought about in the succeeding period. The press was beginning to acquire an influence over public opinion which greatly affected the circumstances of men who were competent to write. The introduction of periodical publications may be referred to the reign of Queen Anne; and political leaders soon felt how great must be the sway upon public measures, and the policy of the two great parties, of discussion thus circulated. It has been well remarked, in reference to the fact of Lord Bolingbroke and the Lord-Chancellor Cowper having contributed to certain periodical publications, that two such statesmen, taking such a course, must have perceived the full extent of this influence. The power of a party-press was realized, and Whigs and Tories, Ministry and Opposition, rallied men of letters in their respective ranks. The man of letters, of course, rose in estimation; his social position was a better one. His attitude was not indeed as advantageous—not as propitious, I mean—to the genial activity of his powers, as that which ex-

isted under the affectionate, generous, and uncalculating relation between the early poets and their patrons and friends. Far less is it to be compared with that lofty independence maintained by Milton; but assuredly far better than such a state of things as degraded most of the authors whose misfortune it was to have their lot cast under the dominion of the later Stuart kings. The period now under review was a palmy one for men who held a pen of power. This was a new condition of English literature, arising from the state of British parties and the expansion of the periodical press. It has been well illustrated by Lord Mahon in his agreeable history of that period:—"During the reigns of William, of Anne, and of George I., till 1721, when Walpole became prime minister, the Whigs and Tories vied with each other in the encouragement of learned and literary men. Whenever a writer showed signs of genius, either party to which his principles might incline him was eager to hail him as a friend. The most distinguished society and the most favourable opportunities were thrown open to him. Places and pensions were showered down in lavish profusion: those who wished only to pursue their studies had the means afforded them for learned leisure, while more ambitious spirits were pushed forward in Parliament or diplomacy. In short, though the sovereign was never an Augustus, every minister was a Mæcenas. Newton became Master of the Mint, Locke was a commissioner of appeals, Steele was a commissioner of stamps, Stepney, Prior, and Gay were employed in lucrative and important embassies. It was a slight piece of humour at his outset, and, at his introduction, the 'City and Country Mouse,' that brought forth a mountain of

honours to Montague, afterwards Earl of Halifax and First Lord of the Treasury. When Parnell first came to court, Lord-Treasurer Oxford passed through the crowd of nobles, leaving them all unnoticed, to greet and welcome the poet. 'I value myself,' says Swift, 'upon making the ministry desire to be acquainted with Parnell, and not Parnell with the ministry.' Swift himself became Dean of St. Patrick's, and but for the queen's dislike would have been Bishop of Hereford. Pope, as a Roman Catholic, was debarred from all places of honour or emolument; yet Secretary Craggs offered him a pension of £300 a year, not to be known by the public, and to be paid from the secret-service money. In 1714, General Stanhope carried a bill providing a most liberal reward for the discovery of the longitude; Addison became secretary of state; Tickell was secretary in Ireland; several rich sinecures were bestowed on Congreve, and Rowe, and Hughes, and Ambrose Phillips."

It is necessary to be cautious, lest we conclude too hastily that the moral improvement of men of letters kept pace with their social improvement. Their elevation in society in consequence of the spread of political literature had indeed brought with it a certain kind of independence, which secured to them a certain dignity in public estimation; but it seems to me that they were too much entangled in associations alien to a pure and elevated literature. Even with that increased independence, there was still preserved a system of patronage such as gave to the Earl of Halifax the reputation of the Mæcenas of the age, and to which authors found it expedient to pay court. These were influences not propitious to the higher aspirations of genius.



The age of Queen Anne was an age distinguished for its courtly refinement, in comparison at least with the grossness which had been so predominant a few years before. The unclean spirit had gone out, but it walked in dry places; during the early reigns of the eighteenth century, England seems to have been in the condition of a relapse. There was a heartlessness in the nation, in all its leading classes, in the Church, in the State, and among its writers. The lofty character of the statesman was lowered to that of the politician, and the inspired bard became chiefly studious of a polished diction and a nicely-balanced verse. The great political parties of a former age had dwindled into tangled factions. Venality had become a prevalent vice, and the current of public affairs was stirred less by the agitation of deep principles than by petty intrigues. Men had lost their magnanimity; and in its stead they trusted to small expedients and large pretensions. Ascendancy was held by wits and freethinkers and shallow philosophers.

After these general notices of the spirit of those times, it is my purpose to look at its influence upon English poetry, as it may be traced in the poems of its representative during almost the first half of the eighteenth century,—Alexander Pope.

Intimately as Pope was associated with men in prominent and active public life, his career was essentially a literary one. The cause to which he devoted all his cares and labours was the acquisition and guardianship of his reputation as an author. Sir Walter Scott has pointed out the striking contrast in this particular between Pope and his robust-minded friend, Dean Swift, who seems to have disdained the character of a mere man of

letters, and to have been careless of his works beyond their mere occasional use. Scott himself had a touch of Swift's character in this particular, and has therefore pointedly adverted to what he regarded as a weakness in Pope's moral and intellectual constitution.

"Pope's character and habits," he remarks, "were exclusively literary, with all the hopes, fears, and failings which are attached to that feverish occupation,—a restless pursuit of poetical fame. Without domestic society or near relations, separated by weak health and personal disadvantages from the gay; by fineness of mind and lettered indolence from the busy part of mankind, surrounded only by a few friends who valued those gifts, in which he excelled, Pope's whole hopes, wishes, and fears were centered in his literary reputation. To extend his fame he laboured indirectly as well as directly, and to defend it from the slightest attack was his daily and nightly anxiety. Hence the restless impatience which that distinguished author displayed under the libels of dunces whom he ought to have despised; and hence, too, the venomous severity with which he retorted their puny attacks."

Now, in such a career it is at once manifest that there is an absence of the magnanimity of a great poet's soul. The highest aspiration of Pope's ambition was the acquisition of fame at the hands of the generation he was living with. He was surrounded by men of talents, of wit and accomplishments, men of the world, men of the town; and he deemed their praises all that a poet need desire. Their admiration was the voucher to him for his fame. He does not seem to have looked above or beyond the companionship of his own generation, as if never

doubting that their judgment must be echoed by posterity. His hopes were centered in the approval of his contemporaries, and he bent his efforts to earn a speedy popularity with them. It has been nobly said of Milton that "his soul was like a star, and dwelt apart." An imagination shining, starlike, brightly and loftily would have probably shone in vain upon the generation in which Pope's lot was cast. Of him it may be said that the light of his genius had more of worldly kindling: it dwelt not apart, but glittered nearly, clearly, and gayly, like a ball-room lamp.

Pope's aspirations were crowned with success beyond all parallel. He gained during his lifetime, and therefore for his own personal enjoyment, a wider and more brilliant reputation than had been attained by any English poet who had preceded him,—a reputation still cherished in the constant admiration of many of our elders, who find in his well-turned and well-tuned and well-pointed lines their favourite quotations. It is my duty now to endeavour to ascertain how that reputation was acquired, and to measure its real height apart from all prepossessions and prejudices.

Let me in the first place remark that Pope's heart, whatever professions of admiration may have occasionally fallen from him, was not with any of his most illustrious predecessors. His path was a continuation of that which had been trod by Dryden. The process begun by that poet, of giving to English poetry the polish of French versification, was to be completed by Pope. He began his career of authorship under the persuasion that his country, while it had produced several great poets, had no great poet that was *correct*; and to supply that de-

ficiency was his study and the aim of his whole course. Apart from Shakspeare, whose genius was a law to itself, it is an interesting fact that each of the great poets fortified his powers by affectionate study of the imagination of his great English predecessors. Spenser has told of his obligations to Chaucer, "the father" of our poetry; and Milton was the student of both Chaucer and Spenser. But Dryden and Pope looked to Continental poetry, with something of repugnance to the insular barbarism of their poetical ancestry: they fashioned their imaginations after the French models, forgetting that in thus copying traits which were natural to France they were smoothing away the bold and distinctive features of their native poetry. It was applying to the fresh and ruddy complexion of the English Muse cosmetics and artificial colour. The imitation was avowed and justified by Pope:—

"We conquered France, but felt our captive's charms;  
Her arts victorious triumph'd o'er our arms;  
Britain to soft refinement less a foe,  
Wit grew polite, and numbers learned to flow  
Waller was smooth; but Dryden taught to join  
The varying verse, the full, resounding line,  
The long majestic march and energy divine.  
Though still some traces of our rustic vein  
And splay-foot verse remained, and will remain  
Late, very late, correctness grew our care,  
When the tired nation breathed from civil war;  
Exact Racine, and Corneille's noble fire  
Showed us that France had something to admire.  
Not but the tragic spirit was our own,  
And full in Shakspeare, fair in Otway, shone;  
But Otway failed to polish or refine,  
And fluent Shakspeare scarce effaced a line:  
E'en copious Dryden wanted or forgot  
The last and greatest art,— the art to blot."

When Pope began his career, the field, it seems to me, was open to the ready accomplishment of his ambition; for the best and earlier English poetry had no more place in the affections of his contemporaries than in his own. How low must have been their appreciation of Shakspeare is in some measure shown by that most remarkable edition of the great dramatist's works,—Pope's edition,—in which he introduced throughout, in the margin, certain marks, intended to point out what he called the most *shining* passages. There were many men who thought like Lord Chesterfield, who said that he was obliged to take snuff when he read "Paradise Lost,"—the small wit of which remark I am not sure that I distinctly see; but I suppose it meant that he needed some stimulus to keep him awake during the effort. Pope showed an instinctive knowledge of the age he was writing for when he made it a chief object to give to English versification a polish and a smoothness surpassing what had been before attained,—not, indeed, transcending the harmony to be often found, but a harmony of unequalled uniformity, free from even occasional harshness. This he was enabled to accomplish partly by elaborate finish and partly by his natural endowment of a correct ear. Versification had been a spontaneous delight in childhood with him: he

"Lisped in numbers, for the numbers came."

The poet introduced himself to public observation by his "Pastorals." These poems could scarcely be read now with any interest even by a zealous admirer of Pope. They had, however, a success that fixed the character of his poetry. The public ear was fascinated with the

unbroken flow of the verse and the unwonted refinement of the diction.

This refining process has influenced so much of English writing that I wish to notice the changes style underwent during the latter part of the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth century. In the years of the Restoration, the language lost much of its purity and its native tone by two opposite corruptions: one, the adoption of very easy and vulgarly-colloquial expressions,—an infection which touched even some of the most celebrated pulpit oratory, a freedom and coarseness of diction denominated *slang*, a word belonging to the very vocabulary it denotes. The other corruption was owing to a mistaken notion of refinement,—a squeamishness in using native strong idiomatic English forms of expression. Dryden gave a sanction to this affectation of a misplaced precision, which I may exemplify by mentioning his determination to correct as faulty and inelegant his use of the Anglicism of ending a sentence with a preposition; changing, for example, the phrase “I cannot think so contemptibly of the age I live in” into “the age in which I live.”

The poets and the critics of this period manifestly prided themselves on superior skill in poetic *art*, and disparaged their greater predecessors for a semi-barbarian rudeness. This was Dryden’s habit of opinion; it was Pope’s; and, to show how general it was, one of the chief victims of Pope’s satire in the “Dunciad,” John Dennis, gave his care to refining what he thought unsightly irregularities in Shakspeare’s drama. The historical play of “Coriolanus” came forth doubly refined under the process, presenting a feebleness of paraphrase

wofully contrasted with the original. "The icicle that hangs on Dian's temple" is made "the icicle that hangs on the temple of Diana."

The Roman's fond expression of constancy to his wife,—

"That kiss  
I carried from thee, dear, and my true lip  
Hath virgined it e'er since,"—

is evaporated in these more polished and mawkish words:—

"That kiss  
I carried from my love, and my true lip  
Hath ever since preserved it like a virgin.

And, to take one more example, who would recognise in this furbished and feeble version,—

"This boy, that, like an eagle in a dovecote,  
Fluttered a thousand Volces in Corioli,  
And did it without second or acquittance,  
Thus sends their mighty chief to mourn in hell,"—

who could recognise the natural burst of mingled triumph and indignation when Coriolanus is taunted with the word "boy"?—

"Boy!—False hound!  
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,  
That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I  
Fluttered your Volces in Corioli:  
Alone I did it.—Boy!"

I notice this propensity to give a high-wrought polish both to diction and metre, because, while it was, I doubt not, the fashion of the times, no one gave more pains to the process than Pope. His versification is entitled to all praise for its exquisite smoothness and beauty of sound, though limited almost entirely to one

species of verse, in which he displayed his skill as a metrist. The couplet which of all others is said to have best satisfied his own ear is the following, in the "*Dunciad*:"—

"Lo! where Macotis sleeps, and hardly flows  
The freezing Tanais through a waste of snows."

The pages of Pope abound also in felicitous combinations of words,—phrases commended to the memory and impressed there by their beauty, which is one of the reasons his lines are so frequently quoted. It would be scarcely possible to find words more happily chosen and more aptly combined than in his well-known expression,—one among many of the same description,—

"To snatch a grace beyond the reach of art."

The success of Pope's early poems misled him into a belief which could not fail to be fatal to him as a descriptive poet of external nature. He found, from the reception of his "*Pastorals*," that people were willing to be pleased with a poetry purporting to be descriptive, in which there was in truth no description of nature either actual or imaginative. The greatest of the poets had been dutiful and affectionate in the study of nature; and the bounteous recompense was that nature ministered to them. So was it with Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakspeare; and with Milton, filling the storehouse of his fancy with treasures that were to last during the famine of incurable blindness. A change came over the spirit of poetry under the dynasty of Dryden, and still more of his follower—follower in time and in poetic theory—Pope. A style of description grew fashionable which betrayed that their communion with nature was not direct, thought-



ful, and imaginative, but through the medium of books and verbal and fantastic. It has been well said that "when Milton lost his eyes Poetry lost hers." A time followed when our poets ceased to commune with nature and ceased to love her, and, as there can be no true knowledge without love, ceased therefore to know any thing about her. Man again became all in all, but not the ideal human nature of Greek poetry in its altitudes of action and passion,—the human nature of what was called the *town*, with all its pettinesses and hollownesses and crookednesses and rottennesses. The great business and struggle of men seemed to be to out-lie, out-cheat, and out-hector each other. Our poets then dwelt in Grub Street, and, to judge from their works, seldom left their garrets, save to go to the coffee-house, the play-house, and other polluted places. Dryden wrote a bombastic description of night, from which one might suppose that he had never seen night except by candle-light. He talked of "nature's self seeming to lie dead;" of "the mountains seeming to nod their drowsy heads,"—much as Charles II. used to do at a sermon;—and of "sleeping flowers *sweating* beneath the night-dews." Yet this was extolled by Rymer, a countryman of Shakspeare's, as the finest description of night ever composed,—an opinion which Johnson quotes without expressing any dissent, telling us, moreover, that these lines were oftener repeated in his days than almost any other of Dryden's. What, then, must have been the knowledge of nature, and what the feeling for it, in an age when the poetical imagery which the readers and repeaters of poetry were accustomed to associate with night, was nature's lying dead, mountains nodding their drowsy heads, and sleep-

ing flowers sweating beneath the night-dews? People even learned to fancy and to tell one another that all this was indeed so. As it is the wont of hollow things to echo, whenever a poet hit on a striking image or a startling expression, it was bandied from mouth to mouth. Thus, "nodding mountains" became a stock phrase, a piece of falsetto, which passed from Dryden to Pope.

This once-celebrated description (and I have seen it quoted, even within a few years past, as an example of Dryden's peculiar felicity in describing repose) is in these vague, inflated, and unmeaning lines:—

"All things are hushed, as nature's self lay dead;  
The mountains seem to nod their drowsy head;  
The little birds in dreams their songs repeat,  
And sleeping flowers beneath the night-dews sweat."

This passage has lost its celebrity; but there is a passage of Pope's which has held its place in public admiration much longer,—his translation of the celebrated moonlight scene in the Iliad,—showing an equal disregard of the most obvious appearances of nature; for, though he had Homer to guide him, the lines have been justly condemned as throughout false and contradictory:—

"As when the moon—refulgent lamp of night—  
O'er heaven's clear azure spreads her sacred light,  
When not a breath disturbs the deep serene,  
And not a cloud o'ercasts the solemn scene;  
Around her throne the vivid planets roll,  
And stars unnumbered gild the glowing pole;  
O'er the dark trees a yellower verdure shed,  
And tip with silver ev'ry mountain's head:  
Then shine the vales; the rocks in prospect rise;  
A flood of glory bursts from all the skies;  
The conscious swains, rejoicing in the sight,  
Eye the blue vault, and bless the useful light,"

“Here,” said Mr. Southey, in a pithy comment on this passage, “are the planets rolling round the moon; here is the pole gilt and glowing with stars; here are trees made yellow and mountains tipped with silver by the moonlight, and here is the whole sky in a flood of glory:—appearances not to be found either in Homer or in nature. Finally, these gilt and glowing skies, at the very time when they are thus pouring forth a flood of glory, are represented as a blue vault! The astronomy in these lines would not appear more extraordinary to Dr. Herschell than the imagery to every person who has observed moonlight scenes.” “Strange,” it has been well said, too,—“strange to think of an enthusiast, as may have been the case with thousands, reciting these verses under the cope of a moonlight sky, without having his raptures in the least disturbed by a suspicion of their absurdity!” I have alluded to these passages to show how, in this school of poetry, its masters, Dryden, and, perhaps still more, Pope, could bring themselves to think the visible universe as of little consequence to a poet. Fidelity to nature—the truthfulness which distinguished the elder poets—was banished as worthless, and fine words and smooth verses were the substitute.

The nature that Pope loved and admired was such an artificial nature as he had formed for himself in his famous grotto at Twickenham. It seems to me typical of his poetry, so far as that poetry purported to be descriptive; especially when I fancy him seated there attired in the costume of Queen Anne’s days, laced tightly in the stays he was obliged to wear on account of the weakness of his figure, his tie-wig pushed a little on one side, as his portrait represents him, or with a velvet cap on his

head, his grotto composed of marbles, spars, gems, ores, and minerals. When I fancy him there eating sweetmeats, or conversing with Lord Bolingbroke, catching his philosophy from that nobleman, the poet thus fancied seems to me the very incarnation of his poetry. How contrasted, let me add, with the tradition of Milton's personal appearance, equally typical, clad in simple dress, a gray coarse cloth coat, and seated at the door of his residence near Moorgate, in warm, sunny weather, to enjoy the fresh air or the affectionate and reverential visit of some friend of simple habits of life like his own! In *his* heart a strong and unadulterated love of nature always had its indwelling; for, when old and blind, all that was left was the pure enjoyment of the fresh air, touching his noble brow and fanning the flowing hair that was parted on it, bringing too, no doubt, recollections of his suburban rambles and the happy rural home at Horton.

But Pope's reputation rests less at the present day on his *descriptive* poetry than upon his satires and his moral poems, besides his heroi-comical poem, the "Rape of the Lock," and the "Eloisa to Abelard." In the latter poem there are evidences of higher efforts of imagination than Pope has shown in any other of his poems; but, unfortunately, his imagination was employed upon a theme of which the grossness has been heightened in his hands, notwithstanding the dazzling veil interposed of exquisitely-finished verse. Of the "Rape of the Lock" I acknowledge my inability of admiration. It always seems to me a piece of raillery wonderfully overwrought and with very little of comic force under its heroic cover. I can enter most heartily, as I hope to be able to show you, into the enjoyment of Burns's elfin creations,—the folks that Tam

O'Shanter met at Kirk-Alloway,—or in Shakspeare's fairy world, the realms and the subjects of Oberon and Titania, Puck and the other merry wanderers of the night keeping their quaint and moonlight revels, following darkness like a dream, singing fairy songs, and,

“By pavéd fountain, or by rushy brook,  
Or on the beachéd margent of the sea,  
Dancing their ringlets to the whistling wind.”

But, as for the ball-room elves, the sylphs of the “Rape of the Lock,” Pope's Zephyrettas and Momentillas, Brillantes and Crispissas, it is essential artifice: they are a sort of brocade-and-hooped fairies; there is no nature, no life in them.

The satirical poems of Pope show great powers in that department of poetry. His satire is a weapon of greater keenness and polish but less weight than Dryden's. The famous character of Addison is an admirable specimen of Pope's best satirical discrimination and skill:—

“Peace to all such! But were there one whose fires  
True genius kindles and fair fame inspires,  
Blessed with each talent and each art to please,  
And born to write, converse, and live with ease,—  
Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,  
Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne;  
View him with scornful yet with jealous eyes,  
And hate for arts that caused himself to rise;  
Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,  
And, without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;  
Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike;  
First hint a fault, and hesitate dislike;  
Alike reserved to blame or to commend,—  
A timorous foe, and a suspicious friend;  
Dreading e'en fools, by flatterers besieged,  
And so obliging that he ne'er obliged;

Like Cato, gives his little senate laws,  
And sits attentive to his own applause;  
While wits and templars every sentence raise,  
And wonder with a foolish face of praise :—  
Who but must laugh if such a man there be?  
Who would not weep if Atticus were he?"

This passage shows Pope's talent for satire to better advantage, it seems to me, than any of his bitter and vehement invectives or the witty sarcasm which abounds in the "Dunciad."

The reputation of Pope has been considerable as a philosophic and moral poet. His philosophic poems are the "Essay on Criticism" and the "Essay on Man," with the supplementary essays. The former was a youthful production with but a small proportion of imaginative spirit, having been first written in prose and then translated into verse. It is a poem which supplies frequent quotations of commonplace truisms in metre, conveniently remembered; such as

"A little learning is a dangerous thing :  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring."

The "Essay on Man" is a more elaborate metaphysical poem, with a high design and a comprehensive scope,—a system of ethics deduced from considerations of the nature and state of man in his various relations. To criticize the execution of this plan and measure its consistency with Christian philosophy cannot now be attempted. Let me only remark, I find it impossible, in reading the poem, to divest my mind of the recollection of the source of the philosophical views to which Pope gave the popularity of verse. By whom was the design

of the poem prompted? by whom its theory and arguments dictated? to whom was it dedicated? and whose praises are interwoven with it as the author's "friend," his "genius," "master of the poet and the song," his "guide and philosopher"? To Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke? And who and what was Lord Bolingbroke? He was one whose name was most prominent in both the literary and political circles of society during the reign of Queen Anne and the first of the Brunswick race of English kings. His youth had been severely trained under a preceptor whom he afterwards sneeringly styles a puritanical parson who made one hundred and nineteen sermons on the 119th Psalm. His early manhood recoiled into the excesses of a libertine; he became a skeptic, priding himself upon the sufficiency of an infidel philosophy; and, when political reverse cast him down from the high place of power and honours into exile and disgrace, he boastfully proclaimed that virtue could find a home on any soil. But his philosophy did not avail him: he pined in a foreign land, a miserable outcast, craving his lost influence and station. The mind of Pope dwelt in the shadow of Bolingbroke's. Now, how could it, thus overshadowed, the light of revelation thus intercepted by the dark and restless leaves of the poisonous tree of a faithless philosophy,—“philosophy falsely so called,”—how could it have other than a stunted growth? The whole body of the “Essay on Man” was Bolingbroke's; and Pope's function was to give it the outward garb of verse,—to give it wings to fly into hearts it never otherwise would have reached. It is utterly impossible to reconcile the notion of Pope's being an author of an exalted and powerful genius, with the mere ministerial relation in which he

was content and happy to stand to Bolingbroke, and such a man who well earned the epithet given in Shakspeare to an earlier one of the same name,—“the *cankered* Bolingbroke.” The poet worshipped the philosopher as his genius:—yes, but unhappily the genius was but a ministering spirit of evil. Like Satan close at the ear of Eve, the infidel was at the poet’s side,—

“Assaying by his devilish art to reach  
The organs of his fancy.”

When the consistency of the reasoning in Pope’s poem with Revelation was questioned, I know that strong men, Warburton among them, were ready to indicate its orthodoxy; but I greatly fear there was something in the constitution of Pope’s mind which fitted it for the reception of the seeds of Bolingbroke’s philosophy. How far the poet was a dutiful child of the Roman Catholic Church I cannot undertake to judge; but a strange kind of faith it must have been when such a sentiment as this passed between him and his noble friend. In Bolingbroke’s elaborate letter to Pope, he says, “You quoted to me once, with great applause, an apothegm:—‘Where mystery begins, religion ends.’” What a poor thing would religion be if its depths were shallows to be sounded by the scant line of such philosophy as Bolingbroke’s! It is just to add that Pope did not himself realize the full extent of the principles he was thus taught; and I can well believe there was lurking in Bolingbroke’s callous heart the infidel scorn at the poet’s deluded innocence, beholding him swallowing the poison unawares. Whatever interpretation may be put on the



poem to reconcile it with Revelation, certain it is that it contains nothing to which Bolingbroke, infidel as he was, could not have given his whole consent. What but the deistical fallacy of the sufficiency of natural religion, as it is called, and the equally sophistical sentiment of a spurious liberality, is in these lines?—

“Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,  
But looks through nature up to nature’s God.”

Or, again, how unsound are those lines so often quoted with unthinking approval!—

“For forms of government let fools contest  
Whate’er is best administered is best.  
For modes of faith let senseless zealots fight;  
He can’t be wrong whose life is in the right.”

As if the administration of a government did not greatly depend upon its form; as if the rectitude of life did not depend on its faith.

One great fault in the constitution of Pope’s mind was the excess of a dangerous element:—the proneness to satire. It is dangerous in any mind,—man’s or woman’s,—the love of saying disagreeable things, the small shafts of which some people always carry their quiver full,—the tendency to criticize, to detect faults; it is dangerous above all to the poet, for it lowers the tone of his enthusiasm, by drawing his thoughts away from the grand and good and beautiful. In any one—poet or other—it brings its own penalty; for it closes at last many sources of pure enjoyment, sacrificing the happiness of delight to the poor pleasure of critical acuteness.

In the worst moral character which Shakspeare has created, he has made the disproportionate excess of satirical temper a large element. "I am nothing," exclaims Iago, "if not critical." Throughout Pope's poems runs an almost uninterrupted vein of satire in some of its forms: it has penetrated even the epitaphs he has written. He scarcely ever touches the character of woman without reproach,—some expression of unmanly contempt or direct insult. How different from that lofty, chastened sentiment of admiration and love which breathes on the pages of every one of our truly great poets! In this as in other respects, what men, what perfect gentlemen, they were! I say this not by way of gallantry, but because I have not the least doubt that it is an element in the true poetic character. Observation on the chief English poets would verify it as a fact; and, if there was time, I believe I could state the theory of it. But, passing that by, Pope seems to have had no correct appreciation of female character. The only woman towards whom he ever entertained any thing approaching a tender passion was, indeed, more of a man than a woman,—Lady Mary Wortley Montague. The text of his celebrated epistle on the character of women was,—

"Most women have no characters at all,"—

a piece of sarcasm the sting of which has been admirably extracted by one who was as full of gentleness of heart as of genius,—the late Mr. Coleridge. "'Most women have no characters at all,' said Pope, and meant it for satire. Shakspeare, who knew men and women much better, saw that it, in fact, was the perfec-

tion of women to be characterless, as Desdemona and Ophelia."

I am not a frequent reader of Pope's poetry, for the simple reason that I am not an earnest admirer of it: as this lecture has probably shown, my heart is not in it. I will say, with all candour, that I have had difficulty in duly appreciating it in close contrast with the superior poetry that has gone before. While preparing this lecture, I have chanced to light upon some notes made several years ago, after reading Pope's poems, and amidst a variety of very crude and puerile criticism I find one expression which, full as it is of boyish fervour, is yet not inappropriate to my more recent examination of the same poetry. The words were simply these:—"I cannot raise my admiration of Pope very high, because I have just come *hot* from Milton."

A short space, I believe, remains before I reach the verge to which I venture to tax your patience. The injurious influence of Pope's poetry in enfeebling English poetry, confirmed as it was by that very exceptionable book of its kind, Dr. Johnson's "Lives of the Poets," and the first signs of the gradual regeneration of imaginative literature in the latter part of the century, are subjects I must seek some opportunity to notice in a subsequent lecture. In that regeneration no one shared more largely than William Cowper,—a true poet, well inspired and well disciplined by the study of one of the chief masters of English song. I had it in my heart to examine with you Cowper's whole career with affectionate attention; but the limits of my course will not permit more than a few allusions, which, I fear, will be as unsatisfactory to you as, surely, they are to myself.

His story, however, is a familiar one; his poetry, closely interwoven with it, is familiar too. The great value of Cowper's poetry consists in its departure from the French school of English verse. Milton was his youthful, his life-long, admiration and model:—

“Then Milton had indeed a poet's charms:  
New to my taste, his Paradise surpassed  
The struggling efforts of my boyish tongue  
To speak its excellence. I danced for joy.  
I marvelled much that, at so ripe an age  
As twice seven years, his beauties had then first  
Engaged my wonder, and, admiring still,  
And still admiring, with regret supposed  
The joy half lost because not sooner found.”

Cowper's early writings were love-verses, meant only for the eye of his fair cousin, who had won his heart and gave her own in return, though they were doomed soon to be parted forever during their long lives. The mysterious malady which during fifty years was the affliction of his life came on in prime manhood. It would have a fearful interest to trace its progress from its first intimations, and the fitful, self-frustrating attempt at suicide, to his residence in a madhouse, and the several relapses in after-years. It might be done without the wantonness of holding “vain dalliance with the misery even of the dead;” but it must suffice to say that it was insanity in its most appalling form,—utter hopelessness of the salvation of his soul,—the monomania of the desperate dread of eternal misery. In the very tumult of his first attack he describes his own condition in a few verses, the most agonized, probably, that ever fell from poet's pen; some of them too distressing to be repeated; the wildness

increased by the Sapphic measure, strange in English verse :—

“Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,  
Scarce can endure delay for execution,—  
Wait with impatient readiness to seize my  
Soul in a moment.

Man disavows and Deity disowns me ;  
Hell might afford my miseries a shelter,  
Therefore, hell keeps her ever-hungry mouths all  
Bolted against me.”

When *bodily* darkness fell on the footsteps of Milton, he imagined it the overshadowing of heavenly wings ; and we might ascribe to a like cause the *spiritual* darkness of poor Cowper's days. The gloomy thought that had taken possession of him was never relinquished ; but often it seemed to fade away into the unreal wretchedness of a distressing dream. Happiness was ministered to him in various forms. He found contentment in humble occupations,—the innocent amusement of some work of mechanism or the playful companionship of the pet animals he has immortalized. Friends, the kindest and most constant man was ever blessed with, were providentially raised up, one after another, to watch over him.

Criticism could find few better themes than to examine the character of Cowper's poetry,—to show it always pure and gentle, though sometimes overcast by the melancholy of his malady or of a sombre theology, and occasionally rising from its usual familiar range to a region of sublimity. There is great interest, too, in tracing how his imagination extracted melody from his madness,—the evil spirit that troubled him charmed to rest by the harpings of his Muse. But I can notice only the most beautiful

of his minor poems. It was Cowper's misfortune to lose his mother before he was six years of age. A picture of her was sent to him when he was nearly sixty years old. At the sight of it there started up images and recollections and feelings which had slept for more than half a century. Time and forgetfulness were baffled by a sister art; and the work was completed by Poetry in as touching lines as ever recorded the movements of a poet's memory into the shadowy region of childhood :—

“ Oh that those lips had language! Life has passed  
With me but roughly since I heard thee last.  
Those lips are thine. Thy own sweet smile I see,—  
The same that oft in childhood solaced me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, while that face renews my filial grief,  
Fancy shall weave a charm for my relief,  
Shall steep me in Elysian reverie,—  
A momentary dream that thou art she.

My mother! when I learned that thou wast dead,  
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed?  
Hovered thy spirit o'er thy sorrowing son?  
Wretch even then,—life's journey just begun!  
Perhaps thou gavest me, though unfelt, a kiss,—  
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss.  
Ah! that maternal smile! it answers, Yes!  
I heard the bell tolled on thy burial-day,  
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,  
And, turning from my nursery window, drew  
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu!  
But was it such? It was. Where thou art gone,  
Adieus and farewells are a sound unknown!  
May I but meet thee on that peaceful shore,  
The parting word shall pass my lips no more!  
Thy maidens, grieved themselves at my concern,  
Oft gave me promise of thy quick return.

What ardently I wished I long believed,  
And, disappointed still, was still deceived ;  
By expectation every day beguiled,  
Dupe of to-morrow, even from a child.  
Thus, many a sad to-morrow came and went,  
Till, all my stock of infant sorrows spent,  
I learned at last submission to my lot,  
But, though I less deplored thee, ne'er forgot."

It did not please Heaven to unweave the tangled meshes of poor Cowper's brain. The dark delusion of despair hung over his mind to the very verge of his long life of just threescore years and ten. His last original piece, the "Castaway," is, indeed, under all the circumstances, one of the most affecting ever composed. He had been reading, in Anson's Voyages, an account of a man lost overboard in a gale of wind: that appalling casualty, which often consigns the sailor to a helpless fate, is told in vivid stanzas, closing with the saddest possible moralizing:—

"No poet wept him ; but the page  
Of narrative sincere,  
That tells his name, his worth, his age,  
Is wet with Anson's tear :  
And tears by bards or heroes shed  
Alike immortalize the dead.

"I therefore purpose not, or dream,  
Descanting on his fate,  
To give the melancholy theme  
A more enduring date :  
But misery still delights to trace  
Its semblance in another's case.

No voice divine the storm allayed,  
No light propitious shone,

When, snatched from all effectual aid,  
 We perished, each alone,—  
 But I beneath a rougher sea  
 And whelmed in deeper gulfs than he.”

On his death-bed Cowper put away the words of consolation and hope that were addressed to him, thus showing, in the words of a friend who tended his last moments, that, though his spirit was on the eve of being invested with angelic light, the darkness of delusion still veiled it. As if to mitigate the anguish of those kind hearts which had watched so dark a death-bed, the expression into which his countenance settled after death was that of calmness and composure mingled, as it were, with holy surprise.

For these very imperfect notices of Cowper, falling so very far below the interest of the subject and my own wishes, let me make some amends by repeating to you some admirable stanzas, entitled “Cowper’s Grave.”

\* They are from a living woman’s pen:—

#### COWPER’S GRAVE.

It is a place where poets crowned may feel the heart’s decaying;  
 It is a place where happy saints may weep amid their praying:  
 Yet let the grief and humbleness as low as silence languish!  
 Earth surely now may give her calm to whom she gave her anguish.

O poets! from a maniac’s tongue was poured the deathless singing!  
 O Christian! at your cross of hope a hopeless hand was clinging!  
 O men! this man, in brotherhood, your weary paths beguiling,  
 Groaned inly while he taught you peace, and died while ye were smiling.

And now, what time ye all may read through dimming tears his story,  
 How discord on the music fell, and darkness on the glory,

\* *Eliza Barrett Browning.*



And how, when, one by one, sweet sounds and wandering lights departed,  
He wore no less a loving face because so broken-hearted,—

He shall be strong to sanctify the poet's high vocation,  
And bow the meekest Christian down in meeker adoration ;  
Nor ever shall he be, in praise, by wise or good forsaken ;  
Named softly, as the household name of one whom God hath taken.

With quiet sadness, and no gloom, I learn to think upon him  
With meekness, that is gratefulness to God whose heaven hath won  
him,

Who suffered once the madness-cloud to his own love to blind him,  
But gently led the blind along where breath and bird could find him,

And wrought within his shattered brain such quick poetic senses  
As hills have language for, and stars, harmonious influences ;  
The pulse of dew upon the grass kept his within its number,  
And silent shadows from the trees refreshed him like a slumber.

Wild, timid hares were drawn from woods to share his home-caresses,  
Uplooking to his human eyes with sylvan tendernesses ;  
The very world, by God's constraint, from falsehood's ways removing,  
Its women and its men became, beside him, true and loving.

But while in blindness he remained unconscious of the guiding,  
And things provided came without the sweet sense of providing,  
He testified this solemn truth, though frenzy-desolated :—  
Nor man nor nature satisfy whom only God created !

Like a sick child that knoweth not his mother while she blesses,  
And drops upon his burning brow the coolness of her kisses,  
That turns his fevered eyes around,—“My mother! where's my  
mother?”

As if such tender words and looks could come from any other !

The fever gone, with leaps of heart, he sees her bending o'er him,  
Her face all pale from watchful love, the unwearied love she bore him !  
Thus woke the poet from the dream his life's long fever gave him,  
Beneath those deep pathetic eyes which closed in death to save him.

Thus? Oh, not *thus*! No type of earth could image that awaking  
Wherein he scarcely heard the chant of seraphs round him breaking,  
Or felt the new immortal throb of soul from body parted,  
But felt *those eyes alone*, and knew "*My Saviour*" not deserted!

Deserted! Who hath dreamt that, when the cross in darkness rested  
Upon the Victim's hidden face, no love was manifested?  
What frantic hands outstretched have e'er the atoning drops averted?  
What tears have washed them from the soul, that *one* should be deserted?

Deserted! God could separate from his own essence rather,  
And Adam's sins *have* swept between the righteous Son and Father;  
Yea, once Immanuel's orphaned cry his universe hath shaken;  
It went up single, echoless:—"My God, I am forsaken!"

It went up from the Holy's lips amid his lost creation,  
That of the lost no son should use those words of desolation;  
That earth's worst frenzies, marring hope, should mar not hope's  
fruition,  
And I, on Cowper's grave, should see his rapture in a vision!

END OF VOL. I.









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